

Mid-Journey Reflections: A Classroom Teacher Incorporates Music

by Lori Knight

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Christian asked me to listen to him play a song at the end of our sixth-grade dulcimer class one day this past January. He flat-picked a song on the melody string, just as he'd done at the end of class many times during the past year and a half. However, something about *this* melody made me want to listen twice. "What's that song called, Christian?" I asked.

"I think it's called, *The Children Aren't All Right*," he answered. "I can't remember who sings it, but it's a heavy metal band--and you might not like the lyrics, Ms. Knight. A few of the words wouldn't be okay for school." I nodded. I figured he was probably right about that, but there was something unique about the melody. I wanted to find out more.

After hearing Offspring's *The Kids Aren't Alright* on Rhapsody.com that evening, I started searching for other artists' less metal-influenced renditions. The Vitamin String Quartet's classical, instrumental version of this song profoundly moved me; I downloaded the song and burned a CD, listened to it repeatedly, and then shared it with students the next day. The combination of a beautiful melody line and rapid rhythm captured my students' attention. They wanted the song to be played again and again.

And so it has come to be that this instrumental version of *The Kids Aren't Alright* has taken hold in both my regular fifth-grade classroom and in the after-school fretted dulcimer classes I teach. I am currently using the Transcribe! and TableEdit computer programs to arrange this song for my sixth-grade dulcimer students to play.

This kind of exchange between my students and me seems extremely common to me now, but music was not always such a central part of life in my classroom; the time that I needed to address other subject areas usually left music on the fringe of the curriculum map. However, when in 2001 our school, under the direction of Marsha Guerrero, first made the commitment to integrate music with other curricular areas, especially language arts, I started to look for new ways to bring songs and musical instruments into the curriculum. This article describes four ways in which the integration of music and other curricular areas have occurred in my classroom over the past five years, as well as how I have come to teach music as a discipline.

Story Orchestra: Reading Made Musical

In order to support our school in the new direction it was taking musically, in 2002 my father, Norman Knight, built three fretted dulcimers for my class of third graders. I had just begun to learn how to play the instrument and on occasion was starting to bring my own dulcimer into the classroom. That year, I developed the idea for “story orchestra.” Students worked in small groups to summarize sections of fictional stories such as *Brave Irene* by William Stein and *Jubal’s Wish* by Audrey and Don Wood. For each text selection, I typed up students’ summaries and then reassembled them into a whole story again. In between the students’ summarized sections, I wrote and inserted song lyrics that emphasized a story character’s traits, dilemmas, or emotions in order to highlight that character’s development as the story unfolded. Each set of lyrics had rhyming lines and was written to the tune of a traditional song that I was currently learning on the dulcimer, such as *Tom Dooley*, *Barlow Knife*, *Cindy*, *Down the River*, or *Bile (Boil) Them Cabbage Down*. When it came time to conduct our story orchestra, students sat in a large circle. Each person held a classroom instrument such as a tambourine, a pair of rhythm sticks, or a set of cymbals. Three students had dulcimers. During story orchestra, students retold each story by dramatically reading their summaries aloud, adding sound effects with instruments, and singing the character development songs. I accompanied students by playing these songs on my dulcimer. The three dulcimer players played one of the songs by strumming simple chords along with me.

One rainy morning in 2003, during our morning recess time, a colleague and I decided to gather our two third-grade classes into one classroom and show them a taped drama of the story *Brave Irene*. Students in both classes had read and studied this story in our third grade reading anthologies, and, as mentioned earlier, my class had also experienced a “story orchestra” retelling of the story. While they were watching the drama, every few minutes my students turned to look at me and smiled widely. I was at first puzzled by this behavior, but then I began to realize that they were simply reacting each time the story came to a place where, months earlier, we had sung a song during our story orchestra. In other words, my students were still keying into the *musical* memories that had been created when we developed our story orchestra version of the reading text. The students’ smiles that day let me know that our story orchestra had added a joyful depth of understanding to their experience with the text.

Research conducted by Steven Rose and his colleagues at the Open University in Britain (as cited in Carter, 1998) suggests that “memories are cloned and that each clone is laid down in a different sensory area of the brain: visual, auditory and so on. Stimulation of one of these clones may in some way trigger the other to give an integrated, multimedia experience.” This implies that when a memory is being created, it is duplicated in its entirety and stored in *each* sensory area of the brain that is related to the memory. When this memory is triggered by even just one of the senses, the *whole* memory returns—not just the part of the memory that is related to the sense that triggered it. As Rita Carter, a medical and science writer further states, “The more aspects to it that a memory has the more useful it becomes and the easier it is to retrieve because each aspect gives a separate ‘handle’ by which to yank out the full memory from storage.” (Carter, 1998, pp. 160-161)

I believe that I may have been watching this type of memory retrieval occur as students smiled and nonverbally let me know that the musical aspect of their experience with the *Brave Irene* text was an integral part of their memory of the story as a whole. The implications that can be drawn from this personal experience and the research give rise to several questions for me as a teacher of language arts. Most of my questions relate to the idea of helping students find ways to fully engage with the fictional texts they are reading. Fully-engaged readers can holistically experience the text on an emotional as well

as intellectual basis, giving them the potential to increase both their enjoyment of reading and the depth of their learning about and through fictional text.

At the fifth-grade level in California, students are required to “contrast the actions, motives . . . and appearances of characters in a work of fiction and discuss the importance of the contrasts to the plot or theme” (California State Board of Education, 1997). If my students and I attach melodies to characters’ traits, motives, and actions during the course of a story, would the melodies more effectively bring out the characters’ development, aspects of the evolving plot, or an understanding of the ongoing major theme of the story? Would the work done while creating musical connections to text cause students to think about the text more analytically, even as they are developing an emotionally-based, meaningful attachment to the text through that music? To show nuances of character development, plot development, and setting (i.e. mood) in a story, could we find or compose melodies in major keys, minor keys, and different modes that express those nuances? Could we begin with a leitmotif for a given character and experiment with developing melodic or tonal variations of that motif to show how the character develops or changes? How could this type of work be done in a timely fashion within the classroom setting? Could homework include having students take a dulcimer and copy of the reading text home so that they can work out some of the musical connections on their own, after I have helped them develop adequate background knowledge in both the musical and literary aspects of the project? How could the connections gained from exploring the text musically be effectively paired with the texts and content of shared reading lessons to emphasize or “bring home” a teaching point? These are all questions that I would like to explore as my students and I take the integration of music and fictional text one step further.

Teaching Music as a Discipline

By October 2003, thanks to my father’s generosity, our dulcimer collection had grown so much that Morrison School was able to hold its first dulcimer class for a group of fifteen fifth-graders. Cyntia Smith, a professional fretted dulcimer player and teacher, agreed to teach this after-school dulcimer class two days per week for the entire school year. I participated as a co-leader in order to learn how to teach music, as well as to assist Cyntia when needed. I observed as Cyntia explained the history and basic mechanics of the dulcimer and instructed the students to hold the dulcimers properly. She also expertly played a few songs, then demonstrated how to hold a pick, press on the strings, execute a forward strum to a steady beat, and play two chords. By the end of the first class, students were strumming and changing chords on cue as Cyntia and I sang *Deep in the Heart of Texas*.

Over the next few months, by both example and detailed coaching, Cyntia taught me how to introduce students to an instrument and guide them as they began the process of becoming musicians. Together Cyntia and I made decisions about the goals of the class, the selection of repertoire, the use of accompanying percussive instruments and tone chimes, and how to foster students’ progress. Students performed on their dulcimers for audiences in the winter and spring of that school year. For the spring performances, we incorporated singing and dancing into the repertoire by including the fifth-graders who were in my class during the school day. Cyntia taught the next year’s group of fifth-grade dulcimer players in a similar manner; I took on a few more responsibilities, most notably arranging and teaching the instrumental introductions and final endings of the dulcimer players’ songs and leading the daytime performances of the singers, dancers, and dulcimer players.

Cyntia was a mentor who was just as dedicated to my students’ progress as she was to my development as a teacher of music. From her, I learned the language of musical instruction and the

importance of consistently and actively seeking to meet the specific needs of individual musicians while finding ways to augment the cohesiveness and performance of the group as a whole.

In 2005, I faced the task of teaching the after-school fretted dulcimer class on my own. At first I was anxious. Although I had a passion for the instrument and had just had a wonderful, two-year mentoring experience in teaching it, the fact remained that I was not a professional dulcimer player. I had been taking private lessons from Cyntia for 2_ years in order to develop correct finger-picking techniques and to build repertoire, but I had not performed publicly. Would this year's beginning fifth-grade dulcimer students be at a disadvantage if they were taught by an enthusiastic, but intermediate-level dulcimer player? I finally resolved to teach the class after deciding that the students would have more to lose than gain if I didn't.

Going Solo: The Limitations of Integration

One of the first hurdles that I encountered when taking over the dulcimer class on my own involved the task of selecting musical texts for students to learn and perform. At our first planning meeting when we began the dulcimer program in 2003, Cyntia and I had surrounded ourselves with stacks of resources: a variety of music books, some of Cyntia's musical arrangements, old LPs, new CDs—and the fifth-grade California content standards for History-Social Science. In educational circles at the time, there was an especially strong emphasis on overtly integrating the curricular areas, so we decided to give our new dulcimer program an academic focus by relating all of our musical choices to U.S. history, the main topic of the fifth-grade social studies curriculum. We found plenty of musical resources for the first year of dulcimer classes, and at the end of that year, our students were proud to play the history-related songs that they had learned. During the second year of the dulcimer program, we also focused mostly on songs related to the social studies curriculum, although we did branch out a little more. By the end of that year, I was beginning to feel restricted by what now seemed like a narrow focus for our music. *By so closely integrating our music with the social studies curriculum, what are we missing out on musically? I wondered. Is there music we could be playing that is more relevant to the students?*

As a result, when I began to teach the dulcimer class on my own, I made the decision to break away from the integration model that Cyntia and I had been using for the selection of musical repertoire. I attended several dulcimer festivals in different parts of the country over the next two years and took classes from many of the nation's professional dulcimer players. As I learned repertoire and techniques from them, I would bring all that I had learned back into the after-school dulcimer program. I also continued to take private dulcimer lessons from Cyntia Smith, who remained a terrific resource, helping me to gather a wider variety of repertoire pieces for students to play. My decisions for choosing students' repertoire began to be based on student interest and the music's level of difficulty. I looked for pieces that would introduce my students to using new techniques such as hammer-ons, pull-offs, and slides. Eventually, our repertoire grew to include music that was played in different styles and genres. Although still largely based in American traditional music, our performance sets became more varied as the complexity of the music grew.

When the president of a local dulcimer nonprofit organization, Southern California Dulcimer Heritage (SCDH), heard about all that our group was doing in the after-school dulcimer program, she invited my students to perform at one of SCDH's community events. So on one Sunday in June 2007, members of the SCDH organization, the public, and the families of eleven of my dulcimer players gathered on a knoll at Huntington Central Park in Huntington Beach, California to eat picnic lunches and listen to my students' dulcimer music. For half an hour, these first-year dulcimer players performed from

memory the set of nine songs which they had brought to performance level during the school year: three jamming (traditional) tunes, one four-part medley in which four traditional tunes sharing identical chord progressions were overlapped, one Cajun tune, a traditional American folk song (which students sang while playing), a ragtime piece, a Calypso-style song, and a claw hammer-style banjo tune. Several audience members later commented on both the sophistication of the students' playing and the wide variety of the repertoire. After the concert, several of my students joined their first community jamming session with musicians who played the banjo, cello, hammered dulcimer, guitar, and autoharp.

Shortly after my students' performance at the park, I found out that there would be an opportunity to teach several of my fifth-grade dulcimer students for a second year, because they were to become part of a new sixth-grade magnet class that was opening up on our campus. So in the summer of 2007, I familiarized myself with California's Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) standards for music education for the sixth grade. The scope of these standards allow for the inclusion of a wide variety of musical selections from many eras, cultures, and genres. As I selected music for possible inclusion in this year's sixth-grade dulcimer program, it became apparent that my second-year dulcimer students would enjoy a rich combination of repertoire pieces. As students learned to play these pieces, they would also be developing VAPA standards-based skills such as performing music in duple and triple meters (i.e., as in the jig, *Off She Goes*) and performing, in ensembles, music that represented various genres, styles, and cultures (i.e., as in *Pachelbel's Canon* and *Una Pastora Yo Ami*). I realized that it was also important to provide a wide variety of challenging repertoire pieces because the variety helped create and hold the students' interest in both the music and in developing new playing techniques such as flat picking and finger picking.

Honoring the Mathematics of Our Music

Another aspect of integration involves an honoring of the mathematics and related patterns of our music. One afternoon while I was participating in one of Susan Trump's dulcimer classes at the 2007 Kentucky Music Week in Bardstown, Kentucky, we began to learn how to play her arrangement of the traditional Irish jig, *Off She Goes*. This jig is written in a compound duple meter in 6/8 time. Susan subdivided one particular measure into a 1-2-3-1-2-3 count and inserted the primary and secondary accents so that the measure read 1-2-3-1-2-3. Susan emphasized that the first "3" (a secondary accent) *leads into* the second "1" (a primary accent), and we played it this way. Then, we deliberately played the measure again, but we ignored the secondary accent at "3," so that it sounded like 1-2-3-1-2-3. By slightly altering the pattern in this way, the lilting feeling of the jig was completely lost. Susan went one step further to state that because the "3" *must* be accented so that it leads to the second "1," we needed to flat pick the "3" (a sharper, more accented sound) rather than use the pull-off technique (a softer, less accented sound), which some of us had been doing.

When I brought this song back to my sixth-grade dulcimer students this past fall, I was able to pass Susan Trump's (and now my) knowledge along to them. Students have come to understand that it is important to honor the mathematics of their music by using correct timing and appropriate accents, by using playing techniques that help keep intact the rhythmic integrity of each piece, and by recognizing patterns and phrases in the music. Our work in this area has also been greatly informed by students' learning experiences with percussionist Andrew Grueschow, a professional musician who teaches at our school as a result of a partnership with the Los Angeles Music Center. Andrew challenges our students and staff members to master Ghanaian polyrhythms as we play a variety of percussion instruments in ensemble groups. In the course of his teaching, Andrew uses a method of vocalization that helps us

effectively count out and keep track of rhythms as we play in ensembles. In dulcimer class, we also use this vocalization method as one way to master the most complex rhythmic patterns in the dulcimer music we play.

All of the work we have done to honor the mathematics of our music has recently culminated in a piece that my seven sixth-grade dulcimer students are currently playing. Tull Glazener has shared his six-part arrangement for *Pachelbel's Canon in D* with our group, along with advice and resources to help us teach and play this piece with success. Over the past few weeks, as each dulcimer player's part was added to the canon, it became increasingly essential for students to think in mathematical terms as they strove to master this piece.

In the past, most of my students have had a tendency to attempt to learn songs almost completely by auditory memory, and then to perform the songs with the support of group members who are playing the same musical material. However, while playing the canon, only one student takes each part; therefore, each student is placed in the position of adjusting his/her learning style so that the usual, more generalized auditory memory is combined with the absolute need to give exacting, focused attention to the rhythmic patterns of a single part as it is being played along with, but also separate from, the other five parts. At first, students struggled in their efforts to discover how the half notes, quarter notes, and eighth notes of each part all matched up rhythmically. We worked together to devise ways in which we could count and accent the music so that everyone stayed with their parts, and on the beat, from the beginning to the end of the piece. The students ultimately realized that the more they honored the precise mathematics of each part as it was being played in the ensemble, the more cohesive, beautiful, and moving the entire canon became.

The Ultimate Integration: Online Forums

We are currently developing another dulcimer project that involves the integration of music, technology, reading and writing. Jeff Hames, the 2006 Mountain Dulcimer National Champion, offers monthly forums online for the larger dulcimer community. Each forum is focused on a topic that is related to dulcimers and dulcimer playing. Other professional dulcimer players from around the country join Jeff in hosting these hour-long online discussions. Jeff, our school's media technician, and I have been working together to design forums specifically and exclusively for my group of fifth- and sixth-grade dulcimer players, and so far we have participated in two of them. During our regular dulcimer class time after school, the dulcimer players and I meet in our school's media lab, and we individually log into Jeff's forum, which he leads from his home in Mississippi. Jeff designs a multiple-choice poll question for students to answer at the beginning of each forum, as a way to welcome students and to get them thinking musically.

The topic of the first forum was "Getting to Know You." For an hour, students asked Jeff questions about his music, dulcimer playing, and playing techniques by typing their messages in the forum windows. Jeff responded with his answers, advice, and encouragement. During this process, students were completely engaged in reading Jeff's and their peers' comments and in writing their responses and questions. Both Jeff and I emphasized that students needed to stay on the designated forum topic, and students knew that they had to read their entries aloud to me first before submitting them. Students were required to use standard English in their forum communications (as opposed to slang-based talk or text-messaging symbols) and were encouraged to use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Our second forum was hosted by both Bing Futch, another professional dulcimer player, and Jeff Hames. Before participating in this forum, students watched an online video of Bing Futch playing the folk song *John Henry*, so that they would have an idea of who Bing was and how he played the dulcimer. We also read and discussed the corresponding story, *John Henry*, in our fifth grade reading anthologies, then listened to a vocal rendition of the song. In addition, students watched an online video of Jeff Hames playing a song in tribute to one of his mentors. During this second forum, Bing, Jeff, and the students discussed the topic of “Playing Contemporary Music on Folk Instruments.” Bing and Jeff discussed with students the steps and techniques they could use in their efforts to play the songs on their dulcimers that they were hearing on their radios and iPods.

As each forum script is eventually spell-checked and publicly posted on Jeff’s website, students can later view the forum scripts when they want to refer to the musical learning that occurred. Jeff will be visiting our school in September 2008 for one day of teaching and performing. We look forward to meeting him in person, and to participating in more of his forums next year.

Professional Curiosity and Purposeful Presentation

It is now the last week of school, and the students are busy creating Father’s Day gifts. A CD containing a compilation of songs that had been performed by our local symphony orchestra for its recent Pops Concert is playing in the background as students work. As I pass by Isaac’s desk, he whispers to me, “Ms. Knight, will you turn up the music? I can barely hear it. I *like* this one—it’s Duke Ellington, right?” I whisper back to him that he’s right, and then turn up the volume. I pause to think about Isaac and his musicianship and why he might have come to value the music of Duke Ellington.

Isaac is a drummer in Karen Calhoun’s World Percussion class on our campus, he has participated in Andrew Grueschow’s Ghanaian drumming and percussion class, and he is a dulcimer player. Isaac is also one of five boys who volunteered, along with eleven of our girls, to sing selections for our class’ spring concert that included (among others) the country song *Seminole Wind* by John Anderson, the classical song *Where E’er You Walk*, music by G.F. Handel, and a slightly revised version of the Broadway musical song *Anything You Can Do* by Irving Berlin. Over the course of time he has spent at our school, Isaac has learned to develop what I would call a type of “professional curiosity.” This term is borrowed from Harold C. Schonberg’s description of Johann Sebastian Bach’s underlying motivation for listening to as much of other people’s music as he possibly could during his lifetime. As Schonberg states, Bach wanted “to know and assimilate all of the music then available, ancient and contemporary . . . How did composers put things together? What was the quality of their ideas? . . . Bach seems to have had insatiable professional curiosity” (Schonberg, 1970, pp. 25-26).

At present, Isaac is *actively* using his curiosity as a bridge to explore and gather his own unique collection of music from different genres, styles, cultures, and eras. His approach is to take in all of the music that is presented to him and find a place for it in his life. He does not limit himself only to the music of the current popular culture. No matter how far Isaac goes musically, he will always have the potential to be enriched by the practice of professional curiosity that he has developed.

I have become aware that in order for my students to develop this type of “professional curiosity” and actively and enthusiastically seek out, listen to, and perform a wide variety of music, I need to purposefully present each piece of music that is introduced in my classes. When I am integrating traditional tunes into a story orchestra, teaching a new playing technique on the dulcimer, focusing on a tricky mathematical pattern in the music, or working with Jeff Hames to prepare students to discuss a

musical topic in our next forum, I am training students to think more meaningfully and professionally about both their music and whatever it is connected with at the time. When students know why the music is being presented to them, and when those purposes are emphasized during the course of instruction, students have a reason to learn and perform the music well, to include it in their personal repertoires, and to integrate it with their experiences in other areas of the curriculum, the school community, and the communities of other musicians with whom they come into contact.

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