

## Research Corner – August 2005

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### **Incorporating multimedia software and popular music into the middle school general music classroom**

Greher, G.R. (2004). Multimedia in the classroom: Tapping into an adolescent's cultural literacy. *Journal of Technology in Music Learning*, 2(2), 21-43.

In the previous *TI:ME Newsletter*, I reported to you about a research study investigating performance quality and student self-evaluations when incorporating model recordings into the middle school and high school instrumental ensemble. The present Research Corner will present the results of an equally interesting study of middle school general music classrooms.

Popular culture – in which music plays a prominent role – serves as the basis for many aspects of an adolescent's life: fashion trends, social interactions, and the development of an individual's preferences. There has been an ongoing debate for the past couple of decades regarding whether popular music should be integrated into the music classroom. On one hand, some believe that focus should remain on Western art music and indigenous folk musics, teaching students an appreciation for these "high" forms of musical expression. Representing another perspective, Gena R. Greher (2004) suggests that including examples of popular culture in the school music classroom "may assist children in achieving a form of literacy that plays a central role in contemporary society while maintaining relevance to their nonschool lives – in effect validating, not negating, their lived experiences" (p. 22). Citing numerous previous research studies as a basis, she proposes that the incorporation of popular culture can be particularly effective during the middle school educational experience, since students at this stage of adolescence highly value belonging to a community ... a social network in which music is closely tied "to how adolescents define themselves" (p. 22).

A special software program, *Picture this!*, was created by the researcher to engage students with an interactive musical task in which they worked in small groups to experiment with adding music to motion pictures. According to Greher, "the objective was to create a context that would stimulate students to think the way a composer might, thereby creating opportunities for analytical listening, critical thinking, creative exploration, and evaluation of one's own work as well as the works of others" (p. 23). Though a complete description of the software is beyond the scope of this column, it is important to note that it consisted of three instructional units. The purpose of the *Introduction Unit* was to demonstrate how music can effect a viewer's perception of a visual narrative by showing the same film clip accompanied by very different kinds of music. In *Screening Room 1* and *Screening Room 2*, the students were provided two or three film clips. They first watched the visual images without sound. Four possible soundtracks were then played along with the motion picture and students were asked to determine which came closest to matching their expectations for musical accompaniment

based on mood, pacing, and the plot line they had interpreted when viewing the scene without music. Throughout this process, students were required to respond to questions about the music and/or film, keeping notes on a “notepad” built into the software, and to discuss their individual thoughts about the music with other group members. At the conclusion of each unit, each group created *their own* musical soundtrack for one of the film clips.

Of particular interest is the fact that the three classes of sixth- and seventh-graders who participated in this study were selected from two inner city Manhattan middle schools in which most of the students were from low income Hispanic families. The three classes were chosen because, based on the descriptions of teachers and administrators, one had been identified as “low interest, low achieving,” another as “high interest, low achieving,” and the third as “high interest, high achieving.” Two of these three classes were considered “at risk.” The primary sources of data collected were the researcher’s observations and field notes, feedback from the Teaching Artists affiliated with the arts integration program at the schools, informal conversations with the teachers, and a series of student & teacher questionnaires.

Results revealed that overall students not only enjoyed the music learning process, but that they benefited in both musical and nonmusical ways. The open-ended pedagogical approach taken clearly conveyed the message to participating students that “their opinions and experiences mattered” (p. 29), validating their ideas, interests, and emotions. At times, in order to explain their thoughts and strategies, students would make references to aspects of popular culture (e.g., movies, cartoons, commercials, or popular music), revealing a high level of adolescent cultural literacy that could go completely unrecognized in the typical classroom where adult expectations and sensibilities constitute the framework for learning activities. Since all students worked in groups throughout these sessions, there was ample opportunity for social interaction, peer learning, and sharing of creative ideas and opinions, as well as evaluating one another’s work. Because the specific musical activities were set up as problem-solving tasks (selecting the most appropriate musical soundtrack or creating a new score), students were actively engaged in the process and participants “could participate at levels that were comfortable for them” (p. 34). As a consequence, “students were exposed to, and often even listened carefully to, a wide variety of music ... analyzing, making decisions, and discussing the rationale behind their decisions” (p. 34). The musical selections used in this study represent a wide range of styles, including film music (John Williams, Vangelis, Bernard Herrmann, James Howard), Western art music (Debussy, Johann Strauss, Aaron Copland) and popular music (Ja Rule, Jay-Z).

Students who utilized the interactive multimedia tasks to solve music-related problems were truly engaged and interested throughout the learning process. From a purely practical perspective, the activities in which these students were participating involve tasks corresponding directly to three of the nine National Standards for Music Education (MENC, 1994):

- #4. Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.
- #6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
- #7. Evaluating music and music performances.

By establishing a context in which the students' interests were paramount, Greher demonstrated that it is possible to create an environment in which students are intrinsically motivated to "explore more, listen further, and broaden their thinking" (p. 37). The researcher concludes her excellent study with the following statement:

By infusing middle school classrooms with music and multimedia that incorporate popular culture, it might be possible for educators to create those moments where what we think students should do and learn intersects with what students may actually want to do and learn. (p. 37)

Can you imagine a better environment for musical learning? As music educators, we would do well to reflect on ways in which these same kinds of benefits could serve our own students by supplementing and enhancing their emerging understanding of music. Though computers and software were an integral part of this particular research study, many of the positive benefits obtained could be achieved without the use of computer technology; for example, matching music to visual images, incorporating group learning activities, integrating peer evaluation, and providing a general sense of acceptance for the popular culture(s) the students themselves value.