

Multiculturalism in Music

by Phil Thomas

If music in school is to help foster a dynamic and expansive multicultural society, experiences in the music program must be widely accessible and creatively based. Teachers must not be just directors, but, more importantly, they should be facilitators who generate, often by indirection, the creative involvement of their students. The listening to and making of music, and the discussion of music in its musical and social contexts, should all lead to heightened awareness of the similarities, differences, and roots of musical forms and styles, broadening the students' taste and breaking down cultural barriers.

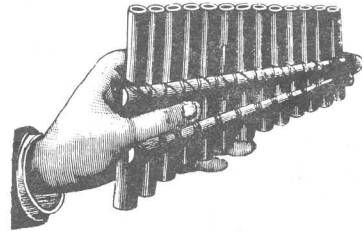
The orientation of the music program should be toward exploration and discovery of music and musicality. Growth in this direction is contrasted with those narrow, often exclusive, performance-oriented programs contrived through rigid training. Such an authoritarian direction produces obedience, repression, and submissive co-operation. What is needed for multicultural readiness and progress is an atmosphere where both external and internal motivation leads to an unforced, warm, and lively participation. With the right balance of direction and indirection, of form and content, the growth of the students can culminate in their desire to hear, re-create, and perform music which belongs to the multicultural heritage of Canadians, a desire which recognizes the commitment and discipline such performance entails.

Since the students' voices are their most accessible, portable, and flexible instruments, a singing program can readily include all students. For this reason, and others associated with the values to be found in the songs themselves, singing should be paramount in the music program. The selection of songs is of great importance. In addition to its basic singability, there should be several good reasons for choosing a song. Does its story or import ring true to someone's experience? (Even a nonsense song can!) Through empathy, can it deepen or broaden the singer's sense of self? Even when songs are chosen to fit some other program in the school, criteria can be applied to ensure that the songs establish contacts among people. Banalities, stereotypes, the merely novel, the flatly didactic should be avoided. The text should be chosen because like a good poem it has levels of meaning and implications. The song should be capable of a variety of interpretations in keeping with the

students' stages of development.

Generally folk songs will meet these standards. They have sprung out of the shared experience of a cultural group, and validate that experience by their directness and honesty. Songs in other languages may be sung in English adaptations or metrical translations, but when the teacher and students are reasonably competent, perhaps with the aid of a consultant (a parent?) and tape recorder, some songs should preferably be sung in their original tongues. Folk songs collected in Canada, which have the added asset of overcoming geographical alienation, are available in several books and on recordings.

Songs in English, retrieved from the oral folk tradition of Western Canada, reflect pioneering conditions and work experiences in the primary industries. Here the multicultural import is that members of many ethnic groups have shared in common the trials of settling-in, and faced the same physical challenges of homesteading and of working in the forests, mines, and fisheries. Together they struggled for their common good



(such as, improved working and living conditions, shorter hours of work, etc.) by organizing themselves into unions. Songs which reflect our regional and local history, of which our lives are an extension, can only assist us in centering ourselves. Such songs can also overcome the cultural colonialism which has hindered the development of our Canadian - and infra-Canadian - identities.

Instrumental ensembles have an important place in the program described here. Aside from producing music for pure listening (and for the challenge and fun of making it), ensembles can accompany songs and chants, poetry readings or recitations, creative movement and dance, and pageantry, and can also provide mood interludes for dramatic presentations. The melody bells, the xylophone and glockenspiel, the baritone ukelele, guitar, and cello, the recorders, the cymbals, and the various drums are all adaptable for ensemble music at the intermediate level. This type of instrumentation is used in the Carl Orff method for teaching music to children, a method which can be easily modified for use with the children's own compositions.

Creative music programs will incorporate

at various levels of growth experimentation with the students' original instruments. Discerning the varied qualities of sounds and silences helps cultivate skills for flexible listening. Another valuable field for exploration is to have the students use the melody bells to invent scales. By using their scales, for example, to accompany creative movement or the reading of their own haiku verses, the students will gain confidence and competence. Many cultures have tunes using the pentatonic scale (e.g., C octave minus F and B, or the black keys on the piano), but the students will find as well other scales which they may later discover by comparison with encyclopedia models to be common modes used by other cultures of the world. Experience with these scales will prepare the students' ears for music which would otherwise be rejected as too strange.

Listening to music of different cultures should be part of the music and social studies programs. One way to plan such listening is to organize it around such multicultural themes as: dance music, work songs (including lullabies), dance and game songs, ballad or story songs, nonsense songs, love songs, religious music, and classical or fine art music. Following themes such as these, interesting series of short listening sessions (about five minutes a day) can be arranged. Resource centres should be encouraged to have recordings available from the many cultures represented in the Canadian mosaic. Some suitable recordings are produced by ethnic groups in Canada and may be borrowed from the students. Of the commercially produced recordings, the most comprehensive library of ethnic music is available on Folkways records of New York. In Canada, Folkways is distributed by Almada Corporation (1700 Rue Beaulac St., Montreal, Que. H4R 1W8). On that label will be found pressings of field-recordings from folk-song and folk-music collections of Inuit, and American Indians in Canada (Kwakiutl, Nootka, Cree, etc.), as well as English and French Canadian material.

Students should be given opportunities to hear and see actual performances of singers and instrumentalists of a professional calibre. Where possible, instrumentalists should be prevailed upon to show and demonstrate their instruments and skills. Films and videotapes are also valuable. Although the overall program envisaged here is in balance pupil-centered, appreciation and participation in an active program should be extended to help the students recognize the quality of a performance. They should realize that special application and self-discipline can make a polished performer, but that marked talent must be present for brilliant artistry. Such a perception should not, however, hinder them from enjoying the music they make themselves.