

LITERACY STRATEGIES IN THE MUSIC CLASSROOM

by Wendy Buehl

If you ask most people, including teachers, about integrating reading and learning strategies in the content area classroom, they would probably think that language arts, social studies, science, and math classes would be areas where this would be useful and successful. If you were to suggest that performance music classes such as band, orchestra, or chorus would also fit in this context, you might very well be met by puzzled looks. Aren't those music classes meant to prepare kids for concerts? What use would the orchestra teacher have for KWL or journaling?

There is a model for music instruction which strives to teach students more than "just the notes". The Wisconsin Comprehensive Musicianship through Performance model (CMP—See *References* for web site information) has as its primary goal that students will perform with understanding. Students need to know how the music is put together, why a composer or arranger made use of various compositional techniques, how this piece fits culturally and historically, and what makes this piece of music worth performing. This involves creating teaching plans for musical compositions which not only teach students musical skills, but engage students in cognitive and affective learning. The CMP teaching model has five parts: 1) the teacher's rationale for choosing the music to be studied, 2) analysis of the music, 3) defining the student outcomes, 4) devising strategies to meet those outcomes (CRISS), and 5) assessing student learning and the success of the strategies (more CRISS). The use of this model has made it easy for me to incorporate literacy activities into my music classroom.

When students in my seventh and eighth grade orchestras were preparing an arrangement of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* for a concert, I created a teaching plan for the piece which sought to expand their knowledge of the overture's historical context, the compositional devices that Tchaikovsky used, and characteristics of

Tchaikovsky's music as it related to the Romantic Period in music history. I tried to give students a variety of experiences and tried to balance the amount of teacher-imparted knowledge with student-centered activity.

Eyewitness accounts of any historical event are always fascinating and enlightening. Since the *1812 Overture* represented the Russian side of the French invasion, I used Count Phillippe-Paul de Ségur's account, *Napoleon's Russian Campaign*, to represent the French. Over several weeks, I read aloud to the students or summarized sections of the book which described the French invasion and, ultimately, the decimation of the French army. We used a map to trace the path of the French army and looked at artists' renditions of the burning of Moscow.

Students also watched a part of Sergei Bondarchuk's film version of *War and Peace*. Part three of this three-part film portrays the preparation for and the actual battle of Borodino, a major battle between the French and Russian armies prior to the invasion of Moscow. Students used a teacher-created study guide to help them focus on the military strategies depicted in the film and also to relate events seen in the film to Tchaikovsky's musical version of such battles. There are numerous parallels between the film and the musical picture Tchaikovsky created. Helping students visualize makes the music they play come to life.

To help students even more with this visualization process, I had students play sections of the piece, stop, and then journal about what actions they thought might be happening. Discussion was usually lively, with students making links back to the film or to their own background knowledge. Students were asked to analyze the music to justify or explain their interpretations. Students also created lists of descriptive words for the various musical genres used by Tchaikovsky: chorale hymn, folk song, and national anthem (*La Marseillaise* and *Czarist National Anthem*). I posted these lists in the

classroom so students could refer to them in discussions or use them to help create the mood of the music.

Creating a CMP plan for a piece is time-consuming, but I have found that it has benefits not only for the students, but for me, as well. I try to devise a plan for most of the music I teach, and this process has led me deeper into each of the pieces my students have studied.

The following examples are literacy activities I have used in my classroom:

- * When studying an arrangement of the folk tune *John Henry*, students spent time in the Library Media Center and on the internet researching tall tales, John Henry, or the history of railroad building. They made a list of sources and kept track of interesting information they found. We then looked at lyrics for the song *John Henry*, identifying aspects of tall tales, noting differences in the various legends, or making sense of some of the vocabulary used to describe railroad building.
- * Students playing a section of J. S. Bach's cantata *Wachet auf* used a Venn diagram to compare the text of the hymn which is the basis for the cantata, and the biblical story from which the hymn was derived.
- * Students learned about Motown Records when they played an arrangement of *My Girl*. They read excerpts from *The Story of Motown* and completed a study guide. They gained an understanding of the difficulties which Berry Gordy and the groups he represented faced and overcame in their efforts to establish a black-owned record company successfully breaking into the "Top 40" in the years before the Civil Rights Act.
- * In a manner similar to Walt Disney's depictions in the movie *Fantasia*, I asked students to listen

to a recording of the piece *Goblin Dance* and describe how they would animate this music.

- * When viewing a video which describes how string instruments are made, students used a KWL guide to access background knowledge on instrument construction, to develop questions they might have about the process, and to record information they had gleaned from the video after viewing it.

While the main goal of a performance music classroom is the performance itself, there is more to music than just playing the notes. We have all experienced performances where the music has touched someplace deep inside of us. I feel that the more students know and understand music, the greater will be their love and appreciation for music throughout their lives. Using strategies which help students access background knowledge and give them a framework for new knowledge makes it possible for music students in my classroom to perform with understanding.

References:

- de Segur, P. (1958). Napoleon's Russian Campaign. New York: Time Incorporated.
- Benjaminson, P. (1979). The Story of Motown. New York: Grove Press, Inc.

For information on the Comprehensive Musicianship through Performance model, you can visit the Wisconsin Music Educators Association website:

www.wmea.com/programs/CMP.html

About the author: Wendy Buehl (yes, she is Doug's wife) is an orchestra teacher at La Follette High School in Madison, Wisconsin. She plays the violin with the Madison Symphony Orchestra and is a guest artist with the Oakwood Chamber Players. In addition, she plays the recorder with friends in the group Musico Coterie, and she directs the handbell choir at Lake Edge Lutheran Church.

NOTE: This article first appeared in the Winter 2002 *Comments from CRISS*[®] newsletter. All material is copyrighted. Permission is granted to photocopy or print this article in its entirety, as long as all credits remain intact with the article and the Project CRISS copyright appears on the materials. This article may not be used in any other publication in any medium, without the express, written permission of Project CRISS.

©Project CRISS