

# Exploring World Cultures with Music

Mary Frances Erler

AS A MUSIC TEACHER, I am always looking for good cross-curricular connections. Music, because it is something that all children enjoy to some degree, is a great way to open new doors to a subject area. Students can be introduced to musical expressions of their own culture and to specific regions of the United States. Music is an integral part of every culture, and so it can be part of any unit of study on a foreign country or distant continent. In addition, music can be a motivating part of a lesson in geography, history, cultural anthropology, and many other aspects of social studies.

Serving as music specialist in a 100-student parochial school, I move in and out of each of our classes, kindergarten through grade six, at least twice a week, and I have found this a unique opportunity to make useful connections between aspects of music and the content of various other fields of study. For example, I used music as the foundation for lessons about seven different cultures. These lessons included activities on geography, science, math, literature, art, physical education, and cultural foods. These curricular connections were devised to incorporate several of the thematic strands in social studies, especially **❶ CULTURE; ❷ PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS; and ❸ INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS.** I have had the opportunity to work with various teachers, developing school-wide multicultural units of study at several different grade levels, but the effort to enhance a standard lesson with music and sound does not need to be as grand or time consuming as that. A short activity linking music and social studies might be found for many topics of study at any particular grade level.

Each teacher in our school (we have one

classroom at each grade level) chooses a culture to study in depth during the month of January. For example, kindergarten used the Latin American unit of study, the first grade teacher chose a unit on cultures in Africa, second grade studied life in Asia, and fourth graders studied Native Americans. An outline of the unit of study on Native Americans is shown below.

I provided to each teacher a standard format, a basic outline, for each unit of study. I also provided additional information such as recipes, words to songs, and folklore, as requested by individual teachers. Each of the units was designed to be flexible, so that the regular classroom teacher and the music specialist could use them in whatever setting was most effective. For example, the music teacher introduces songs and literature during regular music classes, or the classroom teacher can use them at Circle Time. Some activities work best when students gather in small groups, such as writing stories or poems, doing crafts, or playing games. Music can also be taped from recordings for (classroom-only) use in a listening center. In addition to presenting traditional music from each culture, I taught some basic phrases in relevant languages. For example, each class also learned to sing “hello” in four languages besides English, including Spanish, Japanese, German, and Swahili.

Teachers and students’ families can provide additional resources relating to their own cultural traditions if they wish. Educational websites, local libraries, and community organizations are other sources of information and additional activities. Our school librarian was especially helpful in locating literature selections and informational books on various

cultures for each class.

Each teacher developed lesson plans by expanding and adding resources of his or her own, including Internet sites. For example, the fourth grade teacher chose various books on Native Americans from the school library to read and share in literature circles. This class also studied Central American rain forests while learning about the Mayas. For science, they learned about organisms in the rain forest and the impact destruction of rain forests is having on global ecology. For an art project, they turned their classroom into a “rain forest,” with a leafy canopy over head, birds perched in the branches, and monkeys hanging from vines.

Second graders studied Japanese culture. They did several art projects, including weaving full-sized *zabutons* (floor mats) with paper strips. One day they sat on the floor, with shoes off, in Japanese style.

The third grade teacher selected Ireland from the unit options because she is of Irish heritage and wanted to share some of her own cultural background with her students. Together, they explored poems by Eleanor Farjeon and made posters of various Irish quotes and blessings.<sup>1</sup>

The fifth and sixth graders studied Germany, building a “castle on the Rhine” from boxes in their classroom. This class also wrote reports and made posters on German contributions to world culture, from famous classical composers to German automakers.

Families were involved in a culminating Multicultural Fine Arts Night at the end of the month. Each family was invited to bring a snack or dish that reflected a culture that was studied. (Teachers sent home simple, suggested recipes.) Samples of student

# Native Americans:

## An Outline for an Interdisciplinary Unit of Study

### Geography

Location of tribal groups  
The origin of geographic names with Indian roots  
Tribal lands today

### Music (and sources)

“Navajo Happy Song” (1, p.20) or (3, p. 65, Grade 2)  
“Hopi Butterfly Melody” (1, p. 27)  
“Ho Ho Watanay” (2,p. 5) or (3, p. 65, Grade 2)  
“Cayuga Lullaby” (2, p. 39)  
“The Owl Sings” (2, p. 5)  
“Iona” (2, p. 39)  
“Land of the Silverbirch” (2, p. 6)  
“Canoe Song” (2,p. 7) or (3, p. 49, Grade 4)

#### Sources

1. Millie Burnett, *Dance Down the Rain, Sing Up the Corn: American Indian Chants and Games for Children* (Allison Park, PA: Musik Innovations, 1975).
2. Lorna L. Heyge and Audrey Sillick, *Music Makers Around the World: Amerindians* (Greensboro, NC: Music Matters, 1997, rev. 2001).
3. *Music and You* (New York: MacMillan, 1988).

### Math

Drumming patterns (division, fractions)  
Musical Notation of rhythm

### Science

Animal and plant life  
Tracking animals

### Arts and Crafts

Beadwork  
Drawing on “skins” (from brown paper bags)  
Sand painting  
Making rattles and drums

### Anthropology

Shelter and climate  
Matriarchal families  
Hunter-gatherers  
Uses of the buffalo

### Literature

*Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*  
*The Huron Carol*  
*The Gift of the Sacred Dog*  
*An Algonquian Year*  
*The Legend of the Sleeping Bear*  
*The Legend of the Loon*

### P.E./ Movement

Grinding Corn (rock game)  
Hoop Dance  
Duck Dance  
Stick Passing Game

#### Source

See Burnett, M. *Dance Down the Rain, Sing Up the Corn*.

### Food/Nutrition

Popcorn  
Dried cranberries and raisins  
Fry-bread  
Pemmican/ Jerky  
The “Three Sisters”: Corn, beans, and squash



Edward Avilzone/New York Review of Books

artwork, writing, and other projects were put on display in the school gym. In a short program, each class presented one or two songs from its culture, followed by the opportunity for everyone to sample the foods brought for the multicultural potluck.

Parents enjoyed that special evening, and teachers were very enthusiastic about these multicultural thematic units of study, something we had not done in our school before. Plans are being made to take a similar approach in the coming school year. Shall we hear the sounds of Polynesian, Russian, or French-Canadian people in our classrooms? It's an unexpected question that's useful for starting conversations between teachers and a great way to open new doors to a subject area. 🌍

### Note

1. Eleanor Farjeon, *The Little Bookroom* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1955/2003). Farjeon (1881-1965) was an Irish poet best known for the lyrics "Morning Has Broken" as they appear in many hymnals and songbooks. *The Little Bookroom*, a recently reissued collection of delightful short stories for children, won the first Hans Christian Andersen Award and the Carnegie Medal.

### Suggested Books on Native Americans

- Braman, Arlette N. *The Maya: Activities and Crafts from a Mysterious Land*. New York: John Wiley, 2003. Part of the series *Secrets of Ancient Cultures*, this book provides background information and simple steps for related arts and crafts. Chapters include Mayan daily life, society, food, and art and architecture. More than 4 million Maya live in Central America today.
- Brebeuf, Jean de. *The Huron Carol*. New York: Dutton Children's Books, 1990. Illustrated presentation of the carol written for the Huron Indians by Fr. Jean de Brebeuf, a Jesuit missionary, in the seventeenth century. The carol tells the Christmas story in Huron cultural terms, and the illustrations show authentic scenes of Indian life. Historical, Cultural and Religious: Early Elementary and up.

Burakoff, Gerald, and Sonya Burakoff. *Hands on Recorder: A Beginning Method for Group or Individual Instruction*. Ft. Worth, TX: Sweet Pipes, 1995. Recorder (wooden flute) book for beginners that has a great variety of cultural songs represented, including Native American. Musical: Grades 3-6.

Burnett, M. *Dance Down the Rain, Sing Up the Corn: American Indian Chants and Games for Children*. Allison Park, PA: Musik Innovations, 1975. A guide for multicultural project based study of American Indians, with songs, games, instructions, recipes, and other resources. No CD. Cultural and Musical: Elementary.

*Color and Learn: Aztec, Inca, Maya*. New York: Dover, 2002. Reproducible coloring pages for classroom use, with history and background information. Cultural: Early Elementary. See also *Color and Learn: Native America*.

Corwin, J. H. *Harvest Festivals Around the World*. Parsippany, NJ: Silver Burdett Press, 1995. Illustrated book for harvest festivals ranging from ancient Egypt and the Incas to modern African, Asian, and American celebrations. Each section includes history, activities, crafts, and recipes. Informational and Cultural: Early to Middle Elementary.

Goble, Paul. *The Gift of the Sacred Dog*. Hong Kong: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1980. American Indian legend of how the horse came to help the Plains Indians hunt the buffalo. Cultural Folklore: Early Elementary.

Harvey, Karen D., Lisa D. Harjo, and Jane K. Jackson. *Teaching About Native Americans*, 2nd ed. Washington, DC: NCSS, 1997. A brief (86-page) guide for teachers that discusses methods, resources, and curricula. It also provides an overview of historical and current issues. Focus is elementary, but it's useful for all grades.

Heyge, Lorna Lutz and Audrey Sillick. *Musikgarten: Music-makers Around the World*. Greensboro, NC: Music Matters, 1995, rev. 2001. Teacher's guide includes songs, lyrics, suggested dances, games, and activities. CD included. Music Makers materials are a user-friendly source for teachers who may not have a lot of music background. They are available from MusikGarten, 800-216-6864. They also include good story-telling materials and movement activities.

Hirschfelder, Arlene, and Yvonne Beamer. *Native Americans Today: Resources and Activities for Educators Grades 4-8*. Englewood, CO: Teacher Ideas Press, 2000. A detailed (242-page) guide for teachers that provides specific lesson plans on topics such as communication, economics, and "a day in the life" of Native Americans. Elementary and middle school.

Jeffers, Susan. *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*. New York: Dial Books, 1991. Illustration of historic speech by Chief Seattle given when his people were forced to sign the treaty putting them on a reservation. This speech sums up the Native American reverence for the land, and encourages our own good stewardship. Drawings show various Native American tribes. Cultural and Informational: Early Elementary.

Jenkins, Ella. *Multi-cultural Children's Songs*. CD. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways, 1995. Children's music from various cultures, includes information and narration by Jenkins, who interacts with a group of children. Cultural and Informational: Pre-school thru Early Elementary.

McCurdy, M. *An Algonquian Year: The Year According to the Full Moon*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. The year through the eyes and lifestyles of the Algonquian tribes of northeastern North America. Illustrated with beautiful woodcuts. Historical and Cultural: Early to Middle Elementary.

*Musical Instruments of the World: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*. New York: Sterling, 1997. Detailed compilation of all types of instruments, ancient and modern from all around the world. Lots of drawings, history of instruments, and scientific details of how they work. Informational: Upper Elementary.

*Music and You*. New York: Macmillan, 1988. This popular textbook series is for grades K thru 8. It contains a good variety of multicultural materials, especially Hispanic and Native American. Musical and Historical: All levels. Good Native American material in Grades 2-5. Musical and Cultural: Early to Middle Elementary. A CD is available for each grade level.

Wargin, Kathy. *The Legend of the Sleeping Bear*. Chelsea, MI: Sleeping Bear Press, 1988. Beautifully illustrated and touching retelling of the Ojibway legend of Michigan's Sleeping Bear Dunes. Other titles include: *Legend of the Loon*, *Legend of Mackinac Island*, and *Legend of the Ladyshipper*. Cultural and Historical: Pre-K - Grade 3.

### Suggested Online Resources about Native Americans

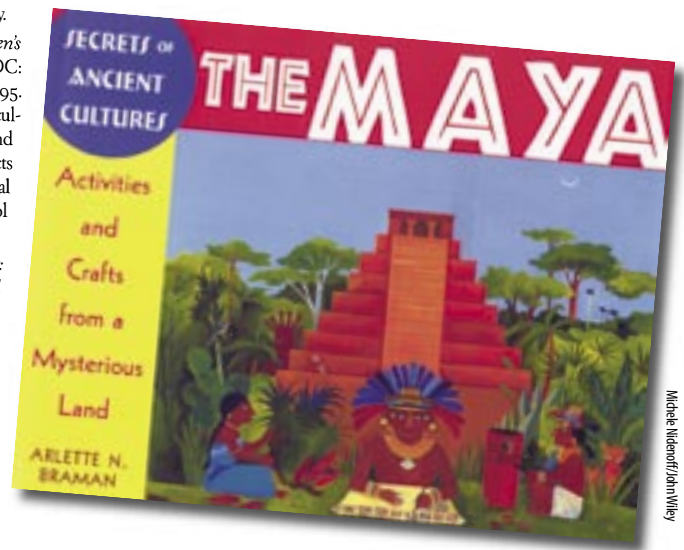
Cradleboard Project [www.cradleboard.org/main.html](http://www.cradleboard.org/main.html). The fast-growing Cradleboard website offers curriculum units for elementary, middle, and high school grades in the disciplines of geography, history, social studies, music, and science. Songwriter Buffy Sainte-Marie founded the site.

National Museum of the American Indian, [www.nmai.si.edu](http://www.nmai.si.edu). The NMAI website of the Smithsonian Institution has various useful pages, including a Resource Center with a bibliography of suggested books. Critical bibliographies on literature for children relating to Native Americans are available in this site's Links section.

NativeTech, [www.nativetech.org](http://www.nativetech.org). An Internet resource for indigenous ethno-technology focusing on the arts of Eastern Woodland Indian Peoples, providing historical and contemporary background with instructions for crafts and background references. Many of the activities can be adapted for the elementary classroom.

NativeWeb, [www.nativeweb.org](http://www.nativeweb.org). NativeWeb is an international, nonprofit, educational organization dedicated to using telecommunications, including computer technology and the Internet, to disseminate information from and about indigenous nations, peoples, and organizations around the world. It is a good place to start for a search on a subject topic or for Native American communities and resources in your area.

Mary Frances Erler is a music specialist at Holy Family School in East Tawas, Michigan.



Michelle Mendenoff/Jan Wiley

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