

Patriotic Music in the Curriculum

by: Kim Holster, General Music Editor

During the next few months, parades will abound as we celebrate several holidays. Television specials will highlight the history of events of our country. What it means to be an American will be on the minds of many. The musical score to these events will be patriotic music. It serves both to set the mood and to stir our emotions. It touches the hearts and minds in ways that words cannot. Children across Massachusetts will be learning about many of these holidays and historical events. However, their education will be incomplete without understanding the music they will hear. Our students need to have a working knowledge of the patriotic songs of our country.

When teaching about patriotic music there are two main considerations: the music itself and the lyrics. Some songs (think most Sousa marches) were written as instrumental pieces. For these examples, the focus obviously rests with the music. However, when the music also has lyrics, it is best to separate these two elements when teaching. This allows students to think about one aspect of the song at a time. It is less overwhelming and ultimately provides a better learning experience.

In order for students to understand the feeling and meaning behind patriotic songs, they need to be able to put the song in historical and musical context. It is difficult for many students to imagine life in different time periods in our history. Providing a brief overview helps students to understand what daily life was like. It also details a timeline with specific events leading up to the writing of the song. Most of our patriotic songs tell a story. The background information is the backbone of those tales. For example: What was Francis Scott Key feeling as he sailed back to shore after the bombardment of Fort McHenry? What was at stake during that battle? Why would Francis Scott Key be

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moved to write a poem? What events would make it famous? Understanding the answers to these questions helps students understand the meaning of the lyrics. "The Star-Spangled Banner" becomes a song with meaning rather than just a bunch of words to memorize.

Many of our patriotic songs were written long ago. As some of my students said, "They are old fashioned and the words don't make any sense". Some of the lyrics, written as poetry, use words of the English language that are not in common usage anymore. In addition, the lyrics are arranged to rhyme and fit a particular meter, so the words are not even in the same order that we would use if we were speaking today. This is a stumbling block for many students. They will need help defining those words so that they can understand the overall meaning of the song.

Patriotic music takes many forms.

Teaching patriotic songs provides opportunities to discuss this element of music. Why are Sousa marches filled with so many repeated sections? "America the Beautiful" is written as a hymn. How will students need to move their eyes across the page so that the words make sense? Most students are familiar with patriotic songs; they hear them in many different places. Being able to follow a score or listening map is a different matter.

While it is important to break down the teaching of patriotic music into manageable sections, without putting it all together, students will miss the beauty of the music and the message it conveys. At the heart of the genre, is the heart of America. Patriotic songs evoke memories of what America was like in the past, what it is now in the present, and hope for America in the future. These three ideas are good discussion points for students. Across the country daily debates occur. What direction should America take? What are the right decisions for the future of the country? Students want to take part in this conversation.

When talking about these issues, it is essential that teachers take a neutral stance on the issues. It is not about what we, as teachers, think; it is about what our students are thinking as they learn about the music. Our job is to guide discussion into deeper meaning of the songs. As such, below are a few questions possible discussion questions, not related to any one song in particular.

- *What modern songs are patriotic?
- *What makes a song patriotic?
- *What topics/ideas/philosophies should be in the lyrics?
- *How should the music sound? Tempo? Instrumentation? a capella?
- *How can the music match the feeling of the song?
- *Should audiences participate in the singing of patriotic songs at public events?

Another avenue of discussion is to focus specifically on the National Anthem. Periodically, the United States Congress is asked to take up the question of what song should be our National Anthem. Senators frequently introduce bills to change the Anthem from "The Star-Spangled Banner" to a different piece of music. Many songs have been considered. None of the bills have passed. Is "The Star-Spangled Banner" the best choice? If yes, why? If not, then what other songs would be better suited to represent the United States?

Patriotic songs are an integral part of the curriculum. In discussing the music, the lyrics, and the story behind some of these famous pieces, students learn not only about American history, they also learn about this country's musical culture and heritage. This is a culture in which they will inherit, shape, and pass on to future generations.

Kim Holster teaches general music in Mansfield, MA. She is a member of the MMEA Editorial Board, and edits the "General Music" column of the Massachusetts Music News.

Resources for Teaching Patriotic Music

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