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Multicultural Music Education: The Pathway to a More Tolerant Society

“Because of the prevalence of Western Classical music in everyday life such as listening to Mozart in elevators, lullabies, availability for learning in schools, sometimes people have the impression that Western Classical music is superior to other genres of music” states Radhika Bhalerao, a musical prodigy trained in both Indian and Western Classical vocal and violin performance. Radhika’s experience is not unique. Many other multicultural youths living in different Western parts of the world face this same disparity with greater importance given to the Western part of their identity thus undermining their own ethnic background. As the world transitions from a collection of different and disjunct ethnicities to a realm of multiculturalism the necessity of the ability to understand other cultures becomes glaringly apparent. Tolerance, empathy, and open mindedness are essential skills in developing the capacity to not only live with the presence of foreign cultures but to thrive and grow alongside them. Teaching these skills prove to be difficult time and time again but perhaps the answer lies in our music education programs. Music educators and researchers Deborah Blair and Shinko Kondo state that through multicultural music education students not only “learn about the music and about other people” but also “find commonalities with their own with their own music and within themselves as musician” (Blair and Kondo). Organizations such as the National Association of Schools of Music, Society of Ethnomusicology, and International Society for Music Education recognize these benefits of teaching diverse music and acknowledge the problem of emphasizing the superiority of western music by disregarding other musical styles. These institutions have developed National Standards for Arts Education which dictate that music teachers must have a more diverse repertoire in educating students (Anderson and Campbell). Implementing these policies in an effective manner, however, requires effort from not only students and teachers but also the community surrounding the students. Literacy in multiple, culturally different, styles of music should be enforced in music education because not only do students improve their own musicality and creativity but also because they develop attitudes that contribute to a more tolerant and inclusive society. This case study demonstrates this idea through the examination of an Indian American student’s experience being trained in both Indian and Western classical music, and the comparison of her experience with other examples of musically diverse music education programs.

Learning different music styles improves musicality because it enforces students to reflect upon skill sets the already have and connect them to a different context. Musicality is one’s ability to take the basic technical tools provided during instruction of a certain style of music and apply them to express emotions, ideas, and stories through the medium of music. Different styles of music can be compared to different languages; in both the means of expression are different but they both are fundamentally convey the same message. Music educators use the dual iceberg representation of musical proficiency to demonstrate how learning a different musical style forces the student to tap into his own previous musical understanding. “If the tip of the iceberg represents the visible surface of individual musical knowledge and skills, the ice under the surface represents a significant amount of one’s conceptual musical understanding from prior multidimensional experience” (Blair and Kondo). These surface features, such as common chord progressions, rhythmic meters, and timbres are the complex technical tools that the students learns to express music of a particular niche. The basic principles of music, or the “ice under the surface” such as rhythmic meters and notes are all similar, if not the same, throughout all cultural niches of music. Therefore when learning new styles of music “we cannot disregard our own musical understanding constructed in our everyday lives” (Blair and Kondo). Learning a new music style, therefore, actively engages the student’s prior musical understanding thus reinforcing those skills which in turn helps him become a better musician within his own niche of music.

Radhika Bhalerao, the subject of this case study, went through this “dual iceberg” phenomenon when she transitioned into learning Western Classical orchestral violin performance from an extensive training in Indian Classical violin and voice performance. When asked about what was the easiest part about learning Western Classical music, Radhika mentioned all of the “ice under the surface” features that had an equivalent in Indian Classical music. She mentioned how although the keys and tonality of most of the Indian Classical pieces she played were strikingly different than those of Western pieces she was able to adjust to the differences relatively quickly because the notes were fundamental the same and she already knew the concept of keys and chord progression. As expected, the most difficult portion of Western Classical music for Radhika to adapt was the “surface feature” of written music. “Western Classical music was more like learning a whole new language. It took a while to memorize which notes meant [what] ... then read while playing and become fluent at it. In Indian Classical music, I had been ear trained – my teacher taught me to pick up pieces by listening to her repeat the line once, so my natural inclination was to play what I heard, not play what I read.” Not only did learning Western Classical music add the ability to read music to her previous music skillset, but it also “broadened [her] perspective of how [she] views [her] own music” and gave her “the tools to better explain Indian Classical music to someone who might know about the genre”. Overall, she became a well rounded and versed musician.

Another aspect of Radhika’s musicality that improved through learning a different genre of music was the creativity of her own compositions. Learning different music genres improves one’s musical creativity because it exposes one to a diverse palette of sounds and encourages one to break away from the rigidity that comes with learning only a single music style. One of the main widely recognized benefits of multicultural music education is the “early exposure to a large array of musical sounds is important in helping students become more receptive to all types of musical expression” (Anderson and Campbell). It is important to develop this ability to be receptive to different styles of music in students in order to cultivate creative musicians. Often times, the first step to creating a new sound, or composition, is to be exposed to new forms of musical expression. The second step is realizing that it is okay to break certain rules to create something original. Through multicultural music education “students can discover many different but equally valid ways to construct music...what would be an unacceptable practice in western music may be perfectly acceptable in music from another area of the world”(Anderson and Campbell). Radhika took these two steps after learning Western Classical music and incorporated them into her own compositions. “I believe learning more than one genre of music makes people more adaptable because they can see that just the basic seven notes can be crafted into so many different ways...Western Classical music provided me with a new musical structure which I could incorporate into improvisational Indian Classical music.” Her showcase in which she presented this new creation received much praise from the audience and critics within the Indian Classical music community because of the revolutionary style she had created by combining the two structures. Radhika improved as a musician in both the Indian and Western Classical realms as well as holistically.

Perhaps the most important benefit of learning music from different cultures is its ability to develop open minded, and culturally accepting and tolerant attitudes by fundamental relatability and social associations of music. Researchers Sandra Trehub and Judith Becker state in their paper *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Music and Musicality* that “foremost among statistical universals is the idea of musicality itself”, in the sense that the capacity to engage in musical activities is universal and “what is performed has an identity” because music just like the performers demonstrates “social memory” (Trehub and Becker). Everyone has the capacity to engage in any kind of musical activity which implies that one can almost in a sense adopt or atleast imitate the social identity of a person from a different culture. This insider perspective on a culture that music provides allows for the development of open mindedness toward and comradery with another culture because it allows one to directly take an experience of a foreign culture and relate it to one's own culture and experience. In a similar case study done on Australian students with a Sri Lankan ethnic background who learned the music of their culture along with Western music, students realized that “every other culture interrelated to your own”. They also learned the influence of other cultures through colonization impacted traditional Sri Lankan music to develop it into what it is today (Nethsinghe). This sort of understanding of the interrelatedness of music from different cultures combined with the attitudes of open-mindedness and comradery is the foundation of a more tolerant society. Learning music through a multicultural perspective also debunks the idea of the superiority of Western music. As more music programs adopt this perspective, “performers, and teachers are coming to realize that many equally sophisticated styles are found throughout the globe and that Western classical music is just one of the many varied styles”(Anderson and Campbell). Radhika also expressed the frustration of dealing with the superiority complex of western music because of its prevalence in society. It is therefore valuable to balance more than one style of music in order to broaden one’s limits both musically and mentally in the openness toward different cultures and their music.

For music to progress, especially in the current age of multiculturalism, it is vital to expose students to different cultural genres of music. Not only does it help develop their own musicality but also helps them become better members of society through the development of tolerant attitudes. In order to implement multicultural music in the basic student curriculum successfully, however, many efforts must be made by teachers, students, and the community that students grow up in. The benefits of multicultural music are clear, but there are many hurdles in implementing the idea and further research and experimentation on small scales need to be done in order to determine the most effective way of doing so.

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