



Notes from the Field Volume 1, Number 1

Getting Started in with CCC in Your School Ensemble

Joshua Cushing
Montville High School
Oakdale, CT

Ensemble repertoire selection is often completed by a committee of one at a desk with a laptop and a purchase order. This method allows music educators to consider a complex confluence of factors such as technical challenges, thematic content, and multicultural solidarity. However, this approach also excludes students from making decisions that will shape their course of study over months of class time. By that definition, most director-centered repertoire selection and programming is a form of educational gatekeeping. This format is appropriate if students are primarily perceived as replication technicians, but they cannot be expected to invest emotional, critical, or creative energy in the performance preparation process if the educator's narrative is prioritized from the onset. In order to pursue the possibilities of the Curious, Collaborative Creativity framework, students' experiences and interests must be revalued from the beginning, which for most music educators means the selection of repertoire.

Paulo Freire's culture circles inspire a more democratic incarnation of repertoire selection (1970/1993, p.120). To begin, my students respond to the following questions digitally (via Google Forms) and group discussions:

- What parts of your identity would you like to explore or share in this class?
- What would you like to learn about music?
- What would you like to learn through music?

Students first complete written responses so they are more prepared to share their thoughts with peers. The resulting small group and class discussions provide a preface for the next meeting. In the interim, the teacher prepares for the next class by reading the digital responses and formatting them for class review. Students names are removed from their comments, though they are welcome to claim their answers during discussion if they wish. The resulting document is displayed on a projector.

What part of your heritage, culture, and/or identity would you like to explore or share in this class?	What would you like to learn about music?	What would you like to learn through music?
I don't really have anything but I want to explore other cultures	How to arrange music.	How to bond with people of other cultures .
I love musical songs and I love to act so I think it would be fun if we learned some songs from a musical to practice expressing through song	How it affects other people	How to arrange
Irish drinking songs	How to make my own good sounding music	How to reach deeper issues without preaching at a pulpit
Irish and Greek	The building and arranging of chords	More about my voice/range
Gaelic music	Chord progressions and more music theory in general	Different languages and messages that music presents
maybe something related to German culture	acoustics and how sound travels	more about the people around me and what their cultures are and what their passions are
I don't have any culture of mine that I'm interested in :(but i would like to explore non-western culture .	Theory , triads and obscure chords and such.	Honestly anything and everything. I'd like to learn more about writing music .
My family comes from italy	I want to learn about theory and how to use it in arranging	Different cultures throughout the world
Personally I don't have anything interesting, I would like to explore others ideas	Exploring culture, music theory	How to experience the most in life, having an open mind
Irish folk music	I have no idea.	I would like to learn my strengths and weaknesses , in hopes to find a better understanding of what I can do in the future in music and life in general.
Guiding Questions		
Why are we here?		
What is happiness?		
Why is multicultural education important?		

Students collectively review the responses in search of community (i.e. ensemble) themes. The discussion concludes with a clarification and agreement upon the themes that will be used as a customized search filter for repertoire (the “playlist”). In example provided, the concrete themes became a) an interest in Irish music, b) arranging, c) triads, other chords, and harmony. Equally important are the conceptual themes of multicultural study, human connection, and self-reflection/ personal work. Other educators may look at the spreadsheet and see different themes. A crucial step is communicating the connections you observe to students so they can be clarified and made accurate for the class’s reality. The director then proceeds with the repertoire selection process using those parameters. In order to honor the parameters developed by the ensemble, the educator may need to diversify their sources for repertoire, especially if considering multicultural repertoire or interest rooted in popular music.

Once the teacher completes the ensemble’s “playlist” of 5-10 pieces, they present each piece of repertoire to the students with materials that will help the ensemble address the technical and cultural considerations of each selection. These materials may include recordings, scores, and cultural/biographical context. For the ensemble discussed above, I brought the following:

- Solo recordings of *She Moved Through the Fair* by Loreena McKennitt and Sinead O’Connor.
- A recording, score, and program notes of *She Moved Through the Fair* arranged for SATB by Anne Barry.
- A recording and score of *Mo Ghile Mar* arranged for SSATTBB by Desmond Earley.
- Recordings of Irish and Scottish melodies arranged and performed by Irmelin (a Swedish folk trio) on the album *North Sea Songs*. One melody, *The Sound of a Tear Not Cried*, is cited as, “In the tradition of Karine Polwart”, a Scottish musician.
- A recording of *sean nós* singing by Róisín El Safty.
- Exploration of resources available through the Connecticut Academy of Irish Music.

Students reflect on technical and cultural consideration for each resource. For example, students expressed sincere interest in performing Anne Barry’s arrangement of *She Moved through the Fair* because it is an Irish melody with text by an Irish poet arranged by a female Irish composer. These identity qualifiers were important to the ensemble because interactions with culture bearers (or approximations of the experience) are highly valued in their multicultural study. When considering Desmond Earley’s arrangement, students noted the setting was exciting and would be well received by their audiences. They were also eager to learn the Irish Gaelic text. Ultimately, the ensemble decided the divisi and extensive tenor solo would make an effective performance unnecessarily challenging to produce.

After review and final discussion of each selection, students begin anonymously voting for the one piece of repertoire the ensemble will pursue. This class voted to study and perform Anne Barry’s arrangement of *She Moved Through the Fair* and collaborate with the Connecticut Academy of Irish Music to learn more repertoire in the aural/oral tradition. You may have noticed that several students were interested in arranging and composing. By collaborating with culture bearers at the Academy of Irish Music, these students hope to discuss how they might respectfully arrange a cappella settings of Irish melodies. This is one example of how a democratic repertoire selection process can also become the initiation of a collaborative teacher-student curriculum.

Beginning with just one selection from a student-guided “Music Teacher World” is important because the omission of more repertoire selections creates space (chronologically and cognitively) for imagination and interest to develop.

Freire, P. (1970/1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.