

Melanie Sadoff
Peace-Building Project

Introduction and Background

It seems to me that orchestra class is founded in a tradition of exclusion and implicit perpetuation of colonialism and exoticism and rigid class structure. But there is also a history of resistance that must be shared. Carlos Simon exemplifies this latter tradition, writing orchestral music permeated with frustration, helplessness, and hope regarding injustice. *Elegy: A Cry from the Grave* was written as a tribute to the lives of Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown. However, the piece has unfortunately remained relevant in our current racial reckoning with the subsequent deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and many others. The following workshop outline will use this powerful piece as a vehicle for discussing racism and police brutality, but its application is not limited to *Elegy*.

Furthermore, “social constructionists [...] argue that words do not mirror the world, but rather construct it” (Abi-Ezzi, p. 94). This concept can be expanded beyond language to include all aspects of a culture in which one lives. There is tremendous work that American society must do to come to terms with the history of and present forms of systemic oppression, and perhaps the most prevalent form, racism. Many of our opinions and implicit biases are formed in the formative years of childhood and adolescence, and I am very excited at the opportunity I have to both teach and learn from the experiences of the young people in my work.

A colleague shared her experience in a participatory forum on peace building, on organizing a concert series: “The experience was uplifting because I saw how music could unite all kinds of music participants in a cause. People of all different backgrounds, experience, and ability took part in this event. There was a feeling of peace and healing because musicians of color were able to share their experiences with a large audience” (Chan). Others in the forum

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responded overwhelmingly positively to this sentiment, sharing their own transcendental moments with music. This kind of uplifting experience is what I am seeking for my students, what all musicians aspire to conjure in their audiences, and perhaps what we all hope to bring to one other through empathy. It must start with introspection and attainment of greater internal peace. From there, we can work together to build “collective vulnerability,” in our music and activities (Jordanger 128-146), we will be able to understand each other’s stories and feel the connection we are all seeking.

The aspirational outcome of this work is conflict transformation. The approach to that goal will not always be easy or calming but holding fast to the ideals and guidelines that Musicians Without Borders provides will aid in perseverance. This project will not end all violence, but it will establish our classroom community as a space where all experiences are respected and valued, ideas and opinions are challenged safely, and beautiful music is both the means and results of that community.

Project Description

This workshop is intended for high school orchestra students playing a piece of music with social justice aims. This is structured over three days with one 40-minute period per day. This workshop should occur once the group is fairly familiar with the piece but still has time before a concert.

Time	Workshop part	Description	Why?
40 minutes	Lesson One - Introduction and Individual Reflections Opening Activity One	Body percussion activity, introduction to piece, individual reflections, and reactions to peer	This is our goal of collective vulnerability, and this starts with the individual. Our work would thus grow from a place

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	Activity Two Closure	responses	of self-awareness and inner peace. Introducing the history and context of the piece will set the foundation for the rest of the work.
40 minutes	Lesson Two - Team Building across Difference Opening Activity One Activity Two Closure	Team building through Guided Images and Music	“The background for doing a GIM session was the need to deal with a rather emotionally demanding session on identity” (132). “The sudden availability of the incredibly deep emotional energy, taking place in an eye-blink, lasted beyond the blink” (136).
40 minutes	Lesson Three - Application to the Repertoire and Reflections Opening Activity One Activity Two Closure	Most intense day; group work; Line and Songwriting activities Reflection and levity/connection to each other and to the music	We return to developing collective vulnerability in the new state of awareness we have of our own biases and experiences, and of each other’s. How do we move forward? Creating a sustainable goal and/or plan to reach it.

Lesson One - Introduction and Individual Reflections

Opening

In our body percussion activity, the students will be forced to be very present. This activity requires the use of your auditory and kinesthetic capacities. The facilitator establishes a sound or gesture that brings the group back to silence as crowd management if needed. Without

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speaking, the group will create a complex song with only body percussion sounds. There are many approaches to this. The method I chose spoke to me because of the immediacy and level of my students' musicianship. Other options include the following: <http://bit.ly/1O6wN2p> and <http://bit.ly/23xGn0e>. Here is how it looked with my students: <https://youtu.be/CrqzXUm6AZY>.

Activity One

We proceed to an introduction to the piece. Now, this workshop can be presented at the start of the repertoire, in the middle, or right before a concert for added passion and enthusiasm. In small groups, students engage with the piece beyond their individual parts. Have questions prepared about the composer, style, etc. for the students to explore. Questions can include, but are not limited to:

- Biography of the composer
- Background of the piece (form, and in this case what an “elegy” is, instrumentation, timbre, special techniques, etc.)
- Background of the dedication of the piece (as applicable)

Now, this research can be done in a number of ways, such as rotational stations, a shared Google document or Jamboard, or in other ways. Be creative! The important thing is getting to the heart of the piece as a work of art in the context of social justice. As they work and you facilitate, consider playing the piece in the background. Here’s a recording of the *Elegy*, played by the Minnesota Orchestra, in honor of Floyd:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9ioBEXmZGU>

Activity Two

This is our time for a reflection on social justice themes. Questions are hung around the

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room to prompt reflection on what social justice means for them and what their lived experiences have been. Every student is given a few post-it notes. The questions are read aloud and displayed on the board. Students will have 30 seconds to write for each question. Then, their answers are written on them and posted to the corresponding prompt's location.

The questions below are somewhat particular to *Elegy*:

- Write down times you've felt hopeful
- Write aspects of society that make you feel powerless or angry.
- What does social justice mean to you?
- How can we do our part to make the world a better place?
- Share some thoughts from a time you felt excluded because of something you couldn't control.

It is vital that time is spent after thoughts are posted for the students to explore the "gallery" and learn from their peers.

There are several wonderful options for this process. Of course, the questions are at the discretion of the facilitator. Consider referring to journal prompts from this website:

<https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/writing/50-unique-journal-prompts-for-teens.html>. For virtual classes or integration of technology, a Google Jamboard, Miro.com, or the annotation function on Zoom may be used. This can be done in a more isolated way depending on your group of students. Playing the repertoire in the background of their work is a great way to get them more familiar with the piece and to encourage students to remain quiet. *Elegy* is about 5 minutes in length, so I would recommend playing two different recordings as they work for a total of 10 minutes.

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Regardless of the variations, the goal should remain center: Students at once reflect on their own experience and learn about other people through this activity.

Closure

At the end of an intense first day of work, using an informal style of debrief may be welcome. I suggest the turn-and-talk method. With one or two others, students can process the information and experiences of themselves and their peers, restate it, reflect on it, and emote. The last one in particular is often formally left out of school music but is essential in this work. Of course, this reflection can be in a small group as well, of three or four, and intentionally planned around the small groups used in the research activity above. Having the students talk to different people in a variety of settings and groupings can be beneficial.

Lesson Two - Team Building across Difference

Opening

We begin day two with a Drum Circle on Peace variation. Using stringed instruments, the students are first led in call and response on the open D string.

This procedure is already a variation on the original, which uses membranophones. Feel free to try this with many different instrument families depending on availability of materials. Depending on the skills and knowledge of your students, you can incorporate pitch in addition to rhythm. This activity is limited to the D string for the sake of simplicity and allows students to solely focus on opening ears to their collective sound rather than some individual technical

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challenge. There is an abundance of activities to do with only one string, which can be seen demonstrated here: <https://youtu.be/BhKdNgvTvZs>.

Activity One

In the Line activity, students step on to a duct taped line if the facilitator's statement is applicable to them. For example, students will obey the statement "Step forward if you saw last week's football game" or "step forward if you feel unsafe walking or being out at night" if applicable to their lived experience. Important statements to include for this workshop (gauge the group for how intense and sensitive the questions should be):

- Step forward if you have ever felt powerless
- Step forward if you or your family are afraid when police are nearby
- Step forward if you have ever witnessed or been the victim of violence
- Step forward if you have ever felt excluded or been bullied
- Step forward if you help pay bills at home
- Step forward if you have ever felt uplifted by music
- Step forward if you believe that we can change the world

Consider the setup of the room. If your space provides, you can line all the students up facing the same direction. Or you can have the line in the middle, with students facing each other on either side, which invites opportunities for eye contact and the feeling of stepping towards each other. The goal is for students to learn about others' experiences and share their own. Calming background music is a welcome addition to center the group.

Activity Two

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Vegar Jordanger gives an in-depth description of the Guided Image and Music technique that he used with a group of people who had recently been through a traumatic experience (Jordanger 133). Having been a participant in the Line activity, I recognize the visceral and physiological reactions that may occur. Thus, it is essential to move through these emotions to a greater place of connection and trust.

First, we can have a moment of silence, respect and sympathy, as the facilitator reads the names of those murdered as a result of police brutality and racism. From there, the facilitator will play musical samples. According to Jordanger, it will be important to select music to which the participants do not listen to regularly or understand the lyrics and thus have associations (134).

Here are songs that may be powerful and conjure images in participants' minds:

- Modern-classical song by Souad Massi from Algeria
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peujg2cKcHs>
- Traditional music from Laos <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qV9PlnnZmUQ>
- Om Namo. An emotionally charged song by Deva Premal
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMPi_IP_o4M
- Traditional Andean music
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04qOSY4IITU>

Once more, there is tremendous room for variations. The songs selected, the order played, and whether or not to preface the activity with a moment of silence is at the discretion of the facilitator.

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At this point in day two we have not spoken to each other! There are bound to be many emotions that participants want to engage, and thus it is time for a discussion. Facilitate a conversation in small groups first, then the large group:

- What images came to mind?
- Think about how you *hope* our society will be in 20xx (e.g. 2040). Be as concrete as possible in descriptions of culture, sports, politics, education, family life, or otherwise (from Jordanger 135).

Once again, variations abound. It is important to reiterate here, as with all of the discussion points, that the guiding questions are at the discretion of the facilitator, and these are particularly relevant for *Elegy*. Simon's composition is deeply hopeful as opposed to daunting cynicism. Therefore, in imagining the future, we put hope into practice.

Lesson Three - Application to the Repertoire and Reflections

On our final day of the workshop, it is important to reflect on what has been accomplished. Students will have expanded on their musical knowledge of the piece. Students will have articulated their frustrations, anxieties, and hopes with their peers in solidarity and empathy or in transformed, peaceful conflict. As Rik Palieri writes, "When people were singing together, they weren't throwing rocks and they weren't throwing bricks." (Palieri 194-195).

Opening

We begin today's work with a standard rehearsal. For the following activities to work, the students must be somewhat knowledgeable of the themes. Students are not sight-reading pitches

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and rhythms. Rather, spend time highlighting the melodies in the piece. Who has the melody, where, and what is it? Again, the repertoire selected is at the discretion of the director for appropriate skill level, instrumentation, etc. to have an accessible amateur musical experience.

Activity One

Here is our songwriting activity. This activity will require both musical knowledge of the piece to best set text as well as the vulnerability and cooperation built up over the past few days. The exact measures or time frame that the students add words to is mandated. First, remind students of the words and phrases collected from the first lesson. Give time for individual reflection in a stream of consciousness way. Then, in small groups, the students come up with lyrics based on those thoughts that we've done over the past few days to express their frustrations, anxieties, and hopes in the realm of racism and racial justice. Make sure that the selection of tune is only a few phrases, very melodic, but not necessarily tonal, and that the rhythm is clear.

This process is piece dependent. *Elegy* is very tuneful and in it, there are easier tonal passages along with more atonal passages that are challenging to vocalize. Each group can use the same passage or choose their own passage. This is an opportunity to assess the group's location in the process of teaching the form and the foundations of the piece (pitch, rhythm, bowing, etc.). Use that knowledge to best choose excerpts. These same variations can be applied to other repertoire.

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Additionally, reference the Musicians Without Borders' "We Shall Overcome" acoustic songwriting activity, as well as Palieri's chapter on Working in the Trenches for more ideas on how to best apply this to your own situation.

Activity Two

Activity one will flow into this one. Here, we are sharing the creations of the groups and singing those words. Plan for this taking up considerable time because it is worthwhile hearing each group's work. Not only is this affirmational for all students, but it is an opportunity for students to feel inspired and proud of their peers' creativity and vulnerability. If students are reluctant to sing, provide the option to play in that small group. Some group members can play the melody while others sing the words to it. Consider what that might mean for setting up microphones. Maybe this intention will manifest as singing along with the recording. Again, consider planning out where certain measures are in a particular video. From my experience, I would avoid prose recitation since it eliminates the power of the music. As much as possible, encourage participants to sing.

Closure

At this point, it is time to make actionable goals. Too often is valuable work just pushed aside in the interest of another concert or gig. Too often are relationships and trust developed through activity isolated to the classroom and then to their habitual cliques do students revert. What I am seeking here is the students' opportunity to write down their greatest takeaways from the workshop and how they will live differently as a result. How has the meaning of music changed for them? What is a contemporary issue that they are passionate about? What are some resources that they can find on Google to sustain their drive to make a difference?

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In this way, there are many possible avenues for a closure activity. I would suggest providing the Equal Justice Initiative (eji.org), the American Civil Liberties Union (aclu.org), and the Highlander Center (highlandercenter.org), as fodder for greater exploration.

Additionally, students can think about what musics they want to learn more about and how those musics are political, and how they either foster or disturb peace.

Guiding Principles (per Musician Without Borders):

- ❖ Safety
 - There are no mistakes. All thoughts, feelings, and expressions are valid and viewed as necessary for the growth of our classroom community, and further, our global citizenship.
- ❖ Inclusion
 - A variety of countries and cultures are explored, led entirely by the present community of students; be it their direct heritage, or in exploration of a country of interest to the student.
- ❖ Equality
 - Brainstorming and group/pair workshops entail the sharing of ideas and unique perspectives, for which all are to be celebrated and be equally considered.
- ❖ Creativity
 - Exploration and listening of various national anthems results in the collaborative creation of a new global anthem.
- ❖ Quality
 - National anthems are models of cultural as well as musical values of each country. Analysis and discussions entail consideration of musical nuances.

Summary or Conclusions

This will be an intense journey for all members, participants and the facilitator alike. However, it is more work like this that will hopefully bring about large, durable change. As Simon says, in regard to his piece, “there is a sense of melancholy, it’s somber and solemnness

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[sic], of course, but there are tendrils of hope. And [it's] these elements that I believe are -- there's some change I believe needs to happen and I'm hopeful for that, I'm optimistic. And so [sic] I've built all of these emotions into the piece and hope for the better" (TheKennedyCenter). Music, and relationships forged through it, has the power to bring about greater peace, and I hope this workshop brings that to your community.

References

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