

## Musings of a Songwriter: Connecting Students to Community and Nature through the Language of Lyric and Song

By Michael Filipowitsch

One of the most enduring lessons that I learned as a musician is that sometimes the most expressive notes are the ones never played. This lesson continues to teach me as I learn to correctly use it within my compositions, as well as live performances. Silence isn't just the canvas upon which music is painted; it is one of the colours on the composer's palette. Silence creates dynamics; it allows the listener to have the opportunity to wonder what is going to occur, actively involving them in a musical journey. The length of silence, the distance between periods of silence and the magnitude of silence all have an effect on the listener. Measures of silence are not waiting periods; rather they are times of active listening, much like a good conversation. I believe this forms a relationship between the music and the listener. I find the same to be true when speaking about the many nuances of environmental education.

During my tenure as an outdoor educator, I have found myself with students in many different natural environments. At first, the tendency was to always be talking, instructing. I eventually learned the difference between the outdoors being the backdrop for the lesson and the outdoors being the teacher. Whenever the outdoors was acting as teacher, my tendency to speak lessened, and the ability to be silent with a group of students proved to be effective. Getting students to connect to a place was aided by the sounds naturally occurring there; be it the wind rustling the leaves or a small group of deer making their way to a familiar feeding ground. As in music, a few moments of silence can raise a participant's expectations of what is about to occur.

When I stopped working at outdoor centres, I moved to the inner-city of Toronto to work with youth. I still found myself intrigued by the different sounds. I often used music as a tool to connect with students and

wrote songs that spoke to the different environmental, social and political aspects of where I was living. In fact, I always seemed to compose songs that acted as companions to where I was or what I was learning. I found when I put thoughts into song, I remembered them. The song medium gave me context and allowed for emotional expression of what I had read, seen or heard. The music enabled things to resonate within me.

Currently, I am curious about the way music and emotion can be integrated with place-based education to foster actively engaged students with a deeper sense of connectedness and appreciation for the natural world.

### Music and Place

Gruenewald (2003a) describes place as a construct for cultural analysis. If this is true, then music may fit well within this context. According to Leavey (2009), "The use of music as a source of data in social research derives from the idea that music is a cultural text, and, as with other cultural texts, by examining music we can investigate a range of questions about the culture in which the texts were produced" (Leavey, 2009, p. 111). More than this, music, when performed, is a "site of embodiment for both the performer and the listener" (Leavey, 2009, p. 113). The production of music is a physical exercise that involves the use of the entire body for both performer and listener. Sound penetrates us, engaging us on a bodily level in fundamentally different ways than the visual, for example (Leavey, 2009, p. 113). In the Inuktitut culture, songs are considered thoughts. These thoughts are "sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices" (Bennett & Rowley, 2004, p. 106). Through music, the Inuit were able to give expression to the part of the human spirit

that “lies beyond the reach of words and actions alone” (Bennett & Rowley, 2004, p. 106).

Music-making can enable us to tap into our passions and emotions, opening up a diverse realm of possibilities. As Gruenewald (2006) claims, “Poetry makes me stop” (p. 3). Further, Gruenewald (2006) contends that “our experience of time—what we have time for and what we don’t—pretty much define who we are and what we believe in” (p. 4). However, in our fast-paced society, stopping is hard to do. Music can help us to stop and breathe, aiding us to reach towards our deep creative places. Through this process, we are able to ask ourselves questions like what really matters, instead of concentrating on what works (Gruenewald, 2006; Jickling & Wals, 2008).

How can educators use music in an effective way that can be engaging, encourage connections with the natural world and promote active citizenry? Elliot (2008) suggests that music needs to be looked at more broadly than solely a piece of music. Music should be viewed holistically to include the situated actions and pieces, products of all forms of music-making of all interested people involved. Within this practice, music becomes “revealing of one’s self and one’s relationship with others in a community” (Elliot, 2008, p. 54).

Elliot proposes that the basic part of what we need in order to reclaim our place in the public sphere—and to become articulate about and for music and music education—is an understanding of what listening to music involves. In *Music Matters* (1995), Elliot proposes a contingent heuristic model of musical works that posits that music work includes at least “six dimensions of musical meaning to listen for: musical design; musical representations of people, places and things; musical expression of various kinds of beliefs (personal, political and so on); and how all these above are interpreted and performed” (Elliot, 1995, p. 54). Within this model, music acts as a way of having meaningful conversations about musical-social consequences of students’ respective

“beliefs, values, or the ethics and morality of their actions” (Elliot, 1995, pp. 55).

In this view, enhancing musical/rhythmic intelligence has nothing to do with what is commonly referred to as musical talent. It has to do with knowing how to use music and rhythm to put ourselves into optimal states for dealing creatively with different situations (Lazear, 1992). Music transforms into something that can bring emotion into the classroom, giving teachers and students another way of seeing, of opening to instead of closing off from, difference in a context of diverse experiences and ways of knowing (Greenwood, 2006).

Integrated within existing theories about place-studies (Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; Sobel, 2004, 1996), music adds yet another dimension and understanding of communities and local environmental issues. Further, music could help transform the language of current curriculum by infusing it with emotional conversations that stimulate students to think critically, and respond through creative expression and cooperative learning.

Orr (1994) often writes about the educated citizen, pointing to how much of the world’s destruction has been perpetrated by people who hold the highest levels of education. Is this a direct function of the messages implicit in our educational institutions? Although all of the answers cannot be prescribed through simply incorporating music within place-studies, this action does offer an avenue for bringing emotional content to the conversation, it can enable a sense of community and it could possibly allow students to critically view the places that they live. In the end, it will be hard for us to preserve the integrity of communities, species and the environment without establishing an “emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well—for we will not save what we do not love” (Orr, 1994, p. 43). I like to imagine that this emotional bond can begin to happen through varied types of transformative interactions, such as the kinds found within properly directed musical experiences.

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