

Songs for Singing:

What songs should all Canadian elementary students learn?

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study was to poll pre-service elementary education students—both music majors and generalists—and their professors in each of Canada’s ten provinces to determine which songs they believe all children attending Canadian elementary schools should know by the end of Grade 6. The total number of completed forms returned was 108. Of these, 103 were from students and 5 were from professors. Responses were received from seven provinces: British Columbia = 45; Alberta = 9; Saskatchewan = 2; Ontario = 7; Quebec = 25; Prince Edward Island = 9; and Newfoundland/Labrador = 9. The top thirteen songs included “O Canada,” “Happy Birthday,” “Twinkle, Twinkle,” “God save the Queen” and a collection of well-known Canadian folk songs. “Amazing Grace” was the only sacred song in the group. With the exception of the national anthem, there was a lack of consensus in this sample. Both official languages were represented but other languages and cultures were sadly lacking. Future studies should poll both students and practicing teachers to determine if consensus can be reached with a larger sample.

Keywords: songs, singing, criteria, national, Canadian

Introduction

Jorgensen (2007) reflects on the “songs we need to teach a nation to sing” (p. 150). Her reasoned argument offers teachers some guidelines for the selection of a common song repertoire although she confesses that there are no easy answers to be found. She argues that considerations of text and ‘singability’ are important as are songs which reflect nature’s beauty and that inspire “hope, courage, bravery, humanity, civility, love for this place, this country, and this world, and carefulness in enabling all living things to thrive” (p. 154). Songs that speak of peacemakers are valued (see also Upitis & Smithrim, 2003) as are songs from other cultures. The selection is key because “the singing of these songs serves to forge a sense of our collective identity as much as reflect it” (Jorgensen, 2007, p. 153).

In 1996, Music Educators National Conference along with the Barbershop Society, Sweet Adelines International, and others launched the *Get America Singing...Again!* Songbook Project. The aim of the project was to “1) establish a common song repertoire that Americans of all ages, know and can sing and 2) to promote community singing” (MENC, 1997, p. 4).

Closer to home, Canadian music educators and academics have spent considerable time and energy debating the importance of *Canadian* content in the curriculum (Bartel, Dollof, & Shand, 1999; Bartel & Shand, 1995; Choksy, 1983; Dawe, 2005; Hollington, 2005; Ruebsaat, 2005; Shand, 1986; Shand & Bartel, 1998; Shand, 2003). Topics addressed include examination and analysis of policy documents and curriculum materials, cross Canada reports of school practice, in-service music teacher reflections on the value of Canadian music in the classroom, and passionate pieces arguing for the inclusion of

Canadian music in education. Still other articles are practitioner based, offering examples of and reflections on experiences with Canadian music (Avery, 2005; Eyre, 2004; Ilaender, 1983; Russell, 2006; Wasiak, 2005). Canada's preoccupation with finding, defining, and exploring its identity (Veblen, in review) or identities (Dawe, 2005) has privileged attention to Canadian content in the curriculum rather than expending national energy on exploring a common song repertoire.

We became interested in the possibility of a common song repertoire as an outgrowth of Author's (in press) study investigating the proficiency with which Canadian secondary school choral students sing the national anthem. When the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic games placed our country on the center of the world stage, the question "What does it mean to be Canadian?" permeated our psyche. In this spirit, we designed a project that aimed to illuminate aspects of our Canadian musical identity. We wanted to discover what songs all Canadian elementary school students should learn by the end of grade six. Our research questions were: can consensus be reached on this question with a significantly large sample? If so, what can we learn about our Canadian musical identity?

The purpose of this exploratory study was to poll pre-service teachers and their professors in each of the ten provinces by means of a survey. We aimed to determine which songs they believe children attending Canadian elementary schools should know by the end of Grade 6. To address the second question, subjects were asked to provide demographic information relating to gender, age, university, mother tongue, cultural background, status (music specialist or generalists; year in program) and province/country where they received their elementary education. Professors were asked to complete the survey also.

Research Design

According to Jaeger (1997), the purpose of survey research is “to describe specific characteristics of a large group of persons, objects, or institutions” (p. 449). He continues by enumerating four common characteristics of surveys: 1) they elicit specific facts about large groups of people; 2) these groups are well defined; 3) researchers are interested in present conditions/thoughts/opinions of the targeted group; and 4) the obvious way to solicit the desired information is by asking the right people (p. 449). For this exploratory study we selected pre-service educators—either music majors or generalists—and their professors enrolled in an elementary music methods course. In addition to asking respondents to list what songs they believe every Canadian elementary school student should be able to sing by the end of Grade 6, solicited background and demographic information. Using convenience sampling (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996), we selected one post-secondary institution from each province from which to solicit participants.

Procedures

An invitation letter was emailed in Fall 2010 to elementary music methods instructors in the following institutions: University of Victoria, University of Alberta including Faculté St. Jean, University of Saskatchewan, Brandon University, University of Western Ontario, McGill University, University of Laval, University of Moncton, University of PEI, Dalhousie University, and Memorial University. Instructors were informed of the study, the fact that the form would be available in both French and English, and that students who did not wish to participate were to leave the survey form blank. Acceptances were received from Victoria, Saskatchewan, McGill, PEI, and Memorial.

Reasons cited for lack of participation were that no suitable class was being offered during the time of the study or that the instructor was on sabbatical. We were able to substitute participants from the University of Lethbridge (AB) and the University of Toronto (ON). Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful in recruiting participants from Manitoba, New Brunswick or Nova Scotia.

Once acceptances were received, e-files of the survey script and the survey itself were sent to participating instructors. Professors were to return completed surveys to the investigators postmarked by February 15, 2011.

Both investigators undertook survey analysis and the principal investigator prepared summary tabulations using excel files.

Results

The total number of completed forms returned was 108. Of these, 103 were from students and 5 were from professors. Seven provinces were represented: British Columbia = 45; Alberta = 9; Saskatchewan = 2; Ontario = 7; Quebec = 25; Prince Edward Island = 9; and Newfoundland/Labrador = 9.

Student demographics

Considering the student demographics, 85 were female (82.6%) while 18 were male (17.4%). Regarding educational focus, there was a more equal balance among respondents: 50 listed themselves as generalists and 53 as specialists. The average student age was 23.5 and the average year in the program was 3.3 years. Students were primarily native English speakers with 100% English speakers coming from Saskatchewan, Alberta, PEI, and Newfoundland/Labrador. In Ontario, where all respondents were specialists, one listed

Korea as place of elementary education and Korean as the first language and one other was educated in the US in English. Not surprisingly, in Quebec, where 18 respondents were generalists and 7 were specialists, seven listed French as their first language and Quebec as their place of elementary education. One student was an immigrant from Denmark. In British Columbia, of the 15 specialists, three were foreign educated students (Hong Kong, China, and England) and two others listed a mother tongue other than English (Cantonese and a bilingual Cantonese/English household). The 28 generalists from British Columbia all had a Canadian elementary education with one exception: a Polish speaker who was educated in Poland.

Professor demographics

The five professor respondents were from four provinces: BC (2), AB, PEI, and NL. The average age reported was 61 with only four responses. All named English as their first language. One received elementary training in the United States while the rest were educated in Canada. Only one was working in the same province in which she received her elementary music education.

Song Responses

A total of 802 song responses, including those of both students and professors, were given with an average of 7.5 per subject with a range from 0-71. Eight participants filled in demographic information but listed no songs. Six were from Quebec and two from Ontario.

Not surprisingly, the highest number of responses came from the professors with 188 total responses. The average number of professor responses was 37.6 and the average

number of student responses (614) was 6.0. A total of 289 songs were listed. This included 24 songs in French (4.2%). Some participants listed that “O Canada” should be learned in both official languages and three noted that “Happy Birthday” should be learned in French.

Some participants, rather than listing specific songs also listed genres and music by specific composers. Genres included Christmas carols, nursery rhymes, folk songs, aboriginal songs, Orff songs, songs from other countries including holiday songs and songs from other cultures. Individual composers named included the Beatles, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, Neil Young, Loreena McKennitt, and Gilles Vigneault. These general responses are not included in the ranking of 289 songs.

It must be noted that participants were not asked on the questionnaire to rank the songs in their order of importance and so the following results cannot be taken as a ranked list. That being said, some trends did occur.

The Top Thirteen Songs

Appearing 90 times is the national anthem, “O Canada.” Seventy-three respondents placed it as number one and it appeared in responses from all seven provinces. In the number two position with 25 listings is “Frère Jacques.” Once again, this song was listed by respondents in all provinces. It is an old French folk song present in many cultures. All participants listed it with the original French title. Ranking in third place with 23 listings is “Land of the Silver Birch.” It was mentioned by respondents in all provinces except PEI. A uniquely Canadian folk song dealing with nature, “Land of the Silver Birch” is often partnered with the number 10 song, “My Paddle’s Keen and Bright.” Fourth place with 20 listings is the Newfoundland folk song “I’s e the B’y.” It was named by respondents in all

provinces except Ontario. Fifth place was a three-way tie with 17 listings each: “ABC or Alphabet Song,” “Twinkle, Twinkle little Star” and “Alouette.” A noteworthy point here is that the “Alphabet Song” and “Twinkle, Twinkle” share a melody and both derive from the original French folk song “Ah, je vous dirais maman” popularized by Mozart’s 12 variations for piano written in 1781/82 whose melody first appeared in print in 1761. Second, “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” was listed by respondents in all provinces. “Alouette” is believed to be an old melody from France and thought to have been sung by the voyageurs. It appeared in responses from all provinces except Ontario. Although English words have been written, they are rarely used. All participants listed it in French. “God Save the Queen,” appearing 16 times, is in sixth place. Not surprisingly, it was mentioned in responses from all provinces, absent only in Quebec. It was once considered to be our national anthem and was sung throughout Canada. With the adoption of “O Canada” as the official national anthem, it became known as the Royal Anthem. The number seven place belongs to “Happy Birthday” with 15 responses. Three participants noted that this song should be learned in French as well. However, within the French speaking population in Quebec, this is not necessarily the birthday song of choice as many use “Mon chère...c’est a ton tour.” In eighth place with 18 listings is the Canadian version of the 1940 Woody Guthrie song, “This Land is Your Land.” Canadian lyrics were created by the Canadian group *Travellers* in 1955. Other countries such as Sweden have created alternate lyrics also. Following closely behind with 12 listings is “Amazing Grace,” the only sacred song in the top thirteen. Composed by William Wilberforce, a staunch 19th

century British abolitionist, “Amazing Grace” is one of the most well known songs in the English world and frequently aligned with the fight to eliminate slavery in the United States and elsewhere. Mentioned above, 10th place belongs to “My Paddle’s Keen and Bright” also known as the “Canoe Song.” However, this song only appeared in responses from BC and NL. In company with “Land of the Silver Birch,” the “Canoe Song” is in a minor key and speaks of nature and the outdoors. Also in 10th place is “Farewell to Nova Scotia” which was listed by respondents in all provinces except Saskatchewan and Ontario. With its roots in the Scottish song “The Soldier’s Adieu,” this song was among a Helen Creighton collection published in 1930 and then popularized on CBC TV’s *Sing-along Jubilee*.

Commentary on the Top Thirteen Songs

None of the thirteen are clapping or action songs. Nine are English songs, two are French, and two are listed as bilingual (“O Canada” and “Happy Birthday”). Two are overtly patriotic (“O Canada” and “God Save the Queen”) while only one is sacred “Amazing Grace.” Six can be categorized as Canadian folk songs—“Land of the Silver Birch,” “My Paddle’s Keen and Bright,” “I’se the B’y,” “Farewell to Nova Scotia,” “Alouette,” “This Land is Your Land”—with “This Land is Your Land” being borrowed from the US and others like “Alouette” having roots in Europe. Only two are in a minor key with the pair frequently being performed as partner songs. In the group, “O Canada,” “God Save the Queen,” “Happy Birthday,” “This Land is Your Land,” and “Amazing Grace” have known composers while the rest are either variants of European songs of

known/unknown origin or seem to be uniquely Canadian.

Discussion

It would be unwise to make sweeping generalizations based on the data received in this preliminary study. That being said, we did notice some overall trends can be reported here and compared to data to be received in round two.

Overall Trends

Considering the first research question, with the exception of the national anthem, there really is a lack of consensus in this sample concerning which songs every Canadian elementary student should learn by the end of grade 6. Both official languages are represented but other languages and cultures are sadly lacking.

Second, the traditional nature of these preliminary results supports the conservative nature of our profession. Also they support current research that states that our profession is overwhelmingly white, female and limited in cultural background (Robinson, 2006, p. 36).

Third, the results speak to generalists' lack of confidence in teaching music as indicated in the literature (King, 1989). When professors were asked why there was such a small sample size for their province (Alberta, Saskatchewan) or why several students declined to participate (Quebec and Newfoundland/Labrador), they stated that many students, especially generalists, did not feel qualified to complete the forms.

Finally, the listings confirm that teachers will often base their teachings on what they already know (Hanley, 2002, p. 3) Songs listed in the top 13 are traditional songs common within many Canadian households. Further, many respondents told us this fact as

a criterion for choosing the songs they did.

Reflections and Next Steps

The first question sparked by the results concerns the feasibility or desirability of reaching a consensus with respect to the songs every Canadian elementary school student should know by the end of grade 6. Is this a valid goal for which to strive? Since education is by decree a provincial responsibility, should we even be contemplating a common song repertoire? Jorgensen (2007) supports the idea but cautions that choosing the songs is not an easy task. Music Educators National Conference has to date made two attempts at producing volumes of songs that all Americans should learn and be able to sing. Should subsequent surveys pose the question in referendum style: “Do you agree that there should be a common repertoire of songs that every Canadian elementary school child should learn by the end of grade 6—yes or no and why?”

A second point concerns the lack of, for want of a better term, “global songs” in the top 13. What does this say about the repertoire being introduced to public school children? Canada’s Multicultural Policy has been in force since 1988 and yet Morton (2000) asserts that, “as Canadian music educators we are failing to position the aims and objectives of teaching music within the aims and objectives of education, specifically multicultural education” (p. 251). Embedded within global music is Aboriginal music. As reported above, British Columbia was the only province with a significant Aboriginal presence in the responses. Considering the recent Canadian parliament apology to the First Nations, ought we not to afford more attention to our indigenous music in elementary classrooms? We realize that securing permission or agreement to perform the music can be challenging,

but there are extant models (Kennedy, 2009, Russell, 2006b) pointing the way to inclusion of this music.

Third, “Amazing Grace” was the only sacred song named in the top 13 although the genre of Christmas songs was listed frequently. This begs the question—what is the role of sacred music in Canada’s public schools? Belz (2002) presents the legal case from a US viewpoint. She writes:

Music educators may use the full range of music literature in an appropriate contextual setting. However, in order to avoid the courts, they must demonstrate sensitivity to the issues raised, be informed of the particular populations of their own school communities, have clear understanding of legal aspects, and be committed to the fact that all children, regardless of faith or no faith, should feel welcome in public schools. (p. 23)

Belz’ advice can easily apply to Canada as well. Knowing both the population of the school and district/provincial policies will provide teachers with the information they require and empower them to introduce sacred music of quality into the elementary classroom.

Finally, we confess that we were disappointed with the response in the first round of our inquiry, especially in Alberta and Saskatchewan. However, the investigation is ongoing and results from several francophone institutions are in the analysis stage. They will be incorporated into the data already presented here as will data from institutions that schedule their elementary music courses in the fall term. Instructors in these universities will be asked to poll their students in the coming year. To broaden the scope of the study, the secondary investigator will post the survey on the Canadian Music Educators

Association website and invite participation from the membership. In subsequent papers we will examine and discuss the criteria, which participants used to select the songs they did. With this expanded data set, we may yet reach consensus on a common song repertoire for Canada's elementary schools.

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