

# From Old School to New Schulwerk: Addressing Sound Worlds of Contemporary Popular Music

BY EVAN TOBIAS

Sometimes imagine a scenario where Carl Orff is alive today in the United States and first developing the Schulwerk amidst a vast landscape of music and YouTube videos, at one moment experiencing Willow Smith whipping her hair back and forth and at another bobbing his head to Rihanna or Jay-Z. How might he interpret and incorporate the contemporary sound worlds of popular music? How might the rhythmic flow and produced beats of rap music filter into his musical sensibility? What connections might he make between the latest dance and music to which it is performed? Upon witnessing children performing covers or arrangements of their favorite songs without adults' assistance, what might Orff think about how music can be learned?

While knowing exactly how Orff would develop his approach based upon today's popular music and culture is impossible, it is worth considering the implications of popular music, its sound worlds, and how people engage with and practice it. Elementary music educators and specifically Orff Schulwerk specialists might then consider potential modifications, extensions, and transformations of how we teach to evolve with contemporary music and society.

## POPULAR MUSIC AND THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM?

Given popular music's reputation for explicit lyrics and imagery portraying subject matter that is overtly sexual, illegal, or violent, some question whether it is appropriate for the elementary classroom. Determining whether to include a particular musical selection may depend on its content; the social context of the music, classroom, and community; and how one plans to

integrate the music. When focusing solely on songs with problematic lyrics or imagery, educators may lose sight of the varied music that could work brilliantly in classrooms. By taking the time to become familiar with the wide range of existing popular music along with researching radio edited or "clean" versions of music, music videos, lyrics, and reviews available online, music educators can make informed decisions about specific music and media to include or exclude. Educators might even facilitate a process in which mature students address and critique lyrics that promote a disagreeable worldview and perhaps even re-create the music from students' perspectives. For example, students might rewrite a song that casts a woman in a negative light in a way such that the woman is portrayed as the protagonist.

Aside from problematic lyrics and imagery, many aspects of popular music partner naturally with characteristics of elementary music classrooms. Popular music is often connected to movement, largely learned and practiced aurally, conducive to improvisation, and often contains rhythmic and pitched patterns that could be performed on a number of classroom instruments. Delving further into the music, however, we find nuances and aesthetics that differ from the musical content, ways of conceptualizing music, or teaching approaches found in traditional classrooms. This might range from the relationship between a produced beat and how one raps over it to the role that reverb or spatialization of a mix plays in expressing loneliness or exuberance in a recorded song.

When discussing Alfred North Whitehead's concepts of romance, precision, and generalization in terms of the Orff approach, Doug Good-

kin provides a helpful framework for integrating popular music in the classroom.<sup>1</sup> Romance in action, according to Goodkin, is "a process of discovery, of curious thoughts, of shaping questions, of seeking answers, and devising new experiences in which the children are allowed to act, see, and hear for themselves."<sup>2</sup> He explains that "precision in music education means learning the concepts and vocabulary of the musical lexicon"<sup>3</sup> and generalization is the application of students' new understanding in a musical context. What does this mean for popular music in the classroom?

Designing environments conducive to students' romance in action of and precision with popular music requires knowledge of the related concepts, lexicon, and contexts through which people engage with these musics. This means considering the contemporary sound worlds that inform popular musics' creation and practice along with understanding the nuances and musical aspects that characterize and differentiate its varied genres and sub-genres. Whether addressing rock, rap, or reggaeton, knowledge of these musics' sound worlds is key to developing precision and relevant generalization of our own and students' engagement with popular music.

We might therefore (1) consider how precise the concepts and skills included in our classroom are for popular music and (2) approach popular music in ways that apply closely to students' lifelong musical engagement. This means being willing to ask questions such as: How are the drones, patterns, and progressions that infuse my curriculum appropriate and relevant to today's popular music? To what degree are students' generalizations and interactions with popular music in my

classroom representative of how it is practiced and engaged with in society?

### FROM BORDUNS TO BREAKBEATS? BROADENING AESTHETIC FRAMEWORKS

To expand our classroom practice, we might investigate new ways of understanding and listening to popular music. In the case of rap music, for example, we might consider an aesthetic of flow, layering, and rupture.<sup>4</sup> Flow, or the way one performs over an instrumental part called the beat, encapsulates a rap artist's rhythmic sensibility and interaction with the beat in ways that play with the feel of time, listeners' expectations, sense of movement, tension, and release through sustained motion and energy.<sup>5</sup> The layering of sounds, ideas, and images are also critical to rap music's "sound" as are ruptures or breaks in movement created by producers, DJs, and MCs. Taken together, flow, layering, and rupture can be considered one way of understanding sonic aspects of rap music.

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Using the familiar Schulwerk concept of elemental or simple rhythmic or pitched patterns in the context of this aesthetic may hinder students from developing a sense of flow and rupture given the holistic nature of how one

uses phrasing, rubato, changing patterns, accent shifts, rhythmic cadences, and dramatic pauses when rapping. Similarly, a focus on functional harmony or intonation makes little sense in the context of most rap music. The disconnect between popular music sound worlds and those of elementary music classrooms may explain why much of the "rap" music published and performed in school contexts sounds metric, quantized, and curiously unlike rap music that has occurred over the past decade. In other words, we might evaluate the precision of how we integrate rap and other popular musics to generalize and connect more closely with their sound worlds. If we are to take Goodkin's and Whitehead's notion of precision seriously, we might observe differences between music upon which the Schulwerk is based and contemporary sound worlds to consider how the musical lexicon developed extensively through Orff workshops might not be the most appropriate or adequate to address popular music.



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Infusing elementary music classrooms with the sound of popular music does not mean replacing music that is currently present. Folk, classical, and popular music can coexist and intersect. The following three approaches are potential starting points to integrate popular music and related sound worlds with what currently exists in the music classroom: (1) incorporating popular music recordings; (2) expanding classroom instruments and equipment to include those commonly used in popular music contexts; and (3) re-interpreting folk, classical, and other musics through popular music aesthetics and practices.

### **INCLUDING POPULAR MUSIC RECORDINGS**

Music teachers must think deeply about their criteria for determining what music to include and exclude in their classrooms. Doing so for popular music requires additional thought and research to account for age-appropriate content, specific aesthetic qualities, and related musical practices. Recordings can be used in settings ranging from students creating their own versions of popular music to mapping out a song's structure through movement. Recordings of popular music instrumental tracks or "beats," used by MCs to rap over and by those creating remixes, can provide a sense of the music without the presence of problematic lyrics. Using instrumental tracks, which are available online, provides a direct connection to the sound worlds of popular music over which students can rap or improvise on classroom instruments. This could provide students opportunities to develop a sense of flow and rupture through experimenting with their creative use of rhythm, dramatic pauses, and accent shifts while exploring musical concepts in a real-world musical context.<sup>6</sup>

### **EXPANDING THE INSTRUMENTARIUM**

If students can practice cross-mallet technique on barred instruments why not crossfader patterns on turntables?<sup>7</sup> If we expect children to discriminate between trumpet and flute timbres why not between Autotune or reverb effects

## **Resources**

### **Starting Points**

Familiarize yourself with what is popular:

- <http://www.billboard.com>
- <http://www.mtv.com/>
- <http://www.hypem.com>
- <http://www.pitchfork.com/>

Research this music using sites and search engines such as:

- <http://www.wikipedia.com>
- <http://www.youtube.com>
- <http://www.google.com>
- <http://blogsearch.google.com>

### **Developing Understanding**

Search book purchasing sites for texts on the various artists, genres, and techniques you discovered during your research. Look at the following organizations and their suggested resources:

- International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM)  
<http://www.iaspm.net/>
- IASPM US Branch  
<http://www.iaspm-us.net/>

### **Copyright and Fair Use**

When interacting with popular music in the classroom and online, know the law and your rights:

- MENC Copyright Center  
<http://www.menc.org/resources/view/copyright-center>
- Creative Commons  
<http://www.creativecommons.org/>
- Center for Social Media Fair Use Guidelines  
<http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/fair-use>
- Temple University Media Education Lab Copyright and Fair Curricular Materials  
<http://mediaeducationlab.com/curriculum/materials>

For additional information and resources related to popular music/culture and music education, the author's blog can be found at <http://musiced.net/etobiasblog>.

processing? Imagine the creative possibilities when MIDI controllers connected to laptops are performed in conjunction with metallophones, electronic drums are played along with tubanos, and digital effects processors manipulate the sound of any instrument.

Many instruments and devices used to create popular music can expand timbral palettes and encourage experimentation. Laptops, tablet computers, and electronic instruments or devices can be viewed as contemporary "classroom instruments" and used in a music room or transported on a cart. Effects

processors afford direct access to create and transform sounds while electronic drum pads provide abounding percussion sounds triggered by hitting or tapping a rubber surface. MIDI controllers interface with music software allowing students to manipulate musical parameters by moving sliders and knobs just as a DJ or performer might. These types of instruments, devices, and controllers allow even the youngest students to create and manipulate music that relates to the timbres found across the popular music spectrum. Whereas some people might view these

instruments and devices as complex technologies with high learning curves, children may see opportunities to learn and play through exploration and trial and error. The instrumentarium of the twenty-first century might therefore be expanded, amplified, and processed.

### RE-INTERPRETING MUSIC: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PARTNER SONGS AND ARRANGEMENTS

Viewing and listening to the countless re-interpretations of popular music across the Internet, such as remixes and mashups, offers a fascinating look into contemporary musical engagement. To create a remix, one takes an existing song and adds new instrumental parts, vocals, stylistic changes, or uses other means to modify the original version but keep it recognizable. Mashups consist of two (or more) musical works that are combined to create new composites. The juxtapositions and relationships between seemingly different musics highlighted in well-

crafted remixes and mashups offer new and exciting ways of listening to and experiencing music.

To gain a sense of the techniques and musical decisions involved in these ways of engaging with music one might (1) search YouTube or a site that sells music to find examples of official and unofficial remixes and mashups, (2) listen to the original versions of the songs that were used to create the mashup/remix, (3) alternate between listening to the original music and remix/mashup to better understand how the material is used and transformed. Musicians such as DJ Earworm and Gregg Gillis (aka Girl Talk) are particularly well known for their exemplary mashups. Musicologist, Wayne Marshall regularly posts mashups and describes the process on his blog.<sup>8</sup> Using the YouTube search bar one can simply type the name of a popular song along with the words "remix" or "mashup" and "tutorial" to find a wealth of resources.

While some might shake their heads at the idea of third graders creating

mashups or fourth graders remixing songs, these musical practices are already present in elementary classrooms, though in different forms. Mashups have long appeared as partner songs while Orff arrangements might be considered variations of the remix. A key challenge of creating twenty-first century partner songs (mashups) and arrangements (remixes) of popular music in the elementary classroom, is doing so in the context of contemporary sound worlds. This is possible, however, if classrooms include popular music recordings and expanded instrumentariums. Furthermore, while it is possible to create arrangements, remixes, or mashups of popular music for classroom use (assuming copyright law and fair use doctrine are observed), students can benefit from working collaboratively with your guidance to figure out how to play and re-interpret music of their classrooms and world outside of school.<sup>9</sup>

Providing students opportunities to imagine and re-create *A Ram Sam*

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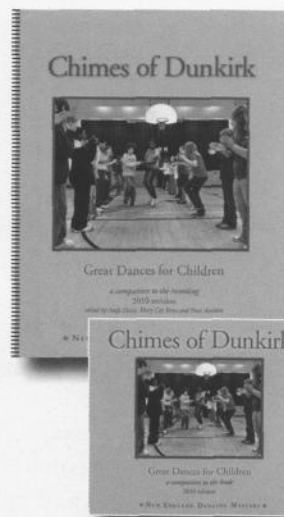
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*Sam* as electro pop or *Paw Paw Patch* as Southern-style hip hop offers new ways of exploring, interacting with, and learning music. This type of musical practice provides students opportunities to think creatively and explore sonic possibilities while building a foundation for lifelong engagement with the music that surrounds them outside of school.

### NEW SCHOOLING: MUSIC EDUCATORS' (POPULAR) MUSIC EDUCATION

Music educators might approach gaining expertise in popular music with the same curiosity and zest for inquiry that they hope to spark and encourage among their students. This may mean moving beyond your comfort zone. Luckily, numerous Web sites, books, and magazines along with organizations such as the International Association for the Study of Popular Music can provide helpful starting points for your education.

I suggest considering the following six questions to guide your exploration of popular music when deciding what to include in your classroom: (1) What is currently popular? (2) Of what styles or genres is this music representative? (3) What are the salient characteristics of this music and how might they differ and/or correspond to traditional Western classical musical frameworks? (4) What additional information and contextualization is important to understand and appreciate this music? (5) Is this music appropriate for my classroom and community? (6) How

Gaining awareness of what is popular can begin by discussing with students their musical interests.



might I approach and integrate this music and/or its characteristics in the classroom?<sup>10</sup>

Gaining awareness of what is popular can begin by discussing with students their musical interests. Educators can use this information in conjunction with Web-based resources such as Billboard.com, iTunes, and YouTube, which provide immediate access to the most popular music of the moment. Both iTunes and Wikipedia can serve as springboards for additional research by providing information ranging from the genre to the history of a particular musical selection. Researching, listening to, and engaging with popular music will assist in developing knowledge of the characteristics and information related to genres, styles, producers, and artists that can inform our practice. This deeper understanding will also help to avoid framing popular music in terms of traditional music theory and Western classical music regardless of other aesthetic sensibilities that may be present. We might then address popular music through romance, precision, and generalization from a more knowledgeable position with integrity.

Carl Orff suggested the importance of pedagogy being “never quite finished, in flux, [and] constantly developing.”<sup>11</sup> This means questioning the degree to which the Orff approach and its corresponding teacher education courses (also known as certification levels) adequately address teaching and learning popular music. We might therefore consider an evolution of the Schulwerk and elementary music education to address changes in the varied sound worlds or musical landscape of our society. After all, our students will be the next generation of beat makers, DJs, performers, remixers, or societal members pursuing lifelong engagement with music. Therefore, our classrooms ought to reflect, or at least incorporate, the music and ways of being musical found in contemporary society with our pedagogy adequately addressing popular musics’ sound worlds and students’ potential to thrive as musicians of today and the future. ■



*Evan Tobias is assistant professor of music education at Arizona State University and heads the Consortium for Digital, Popular, and Participatory Culture in Music Education (CDPPCME) @ ASU. Prior to his appointment at ASU, he taught middle school instrumental and general music in New York. Evan's recent research focuses on creative uses of technology, issues of social justice, expanding beyond traditional music curricula, and approaches to integrating popular culture and music in music classrooms.*

1. Doug Goodkin, “Orff-Schulwerk in the New Millennium,” *Music Educators Journal*, 88 (2001).  
 2. Ibid, 20.  
 3. Ibid.  
 4. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), 38.  
 5. Ibid.  
 6. For additional information on engaging with concepts in musical contexts, see Eunice Boardman. (ed), *Dimensions of Musical Learning and Teaching: A Different Kind of Classroom*. Reston, VA: MENC, 2002; Jackie Wiggins, *Teaching For Musical Understanding, 2nd ed.* Rochester, MI: Center for Applied Research in Musical Understanding, 2009.  
 7. See DJ A-Kidd who has been DJ'ing since he was five years old: [http://www.youtube.com/user/DJJPGUNNz#p/u/13/iDNWD\\_TyxwA](http://www.youtube.com/user/DJJPGUNNz#p/u/13/iDNWD_TyxwA).  
 8. See <http://wayneandwax.com> and click on the mashup tag for examples of mashups with analysis on Wayne Marshall's blog.  
 9. See the Musical Futures Project for examples of how secondary students in the UK create their own versions of popular music: <http://www.musicalfutures.org.uk/>.  
 10. The facets model for planning instruction around musical selections can assist in this process. See Janet Barrett, Claire McCoy, and Kari Veblen, *Sound Ways of Knowing: Music in the Interdisciplinary Curriculum*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1997.  
 11. Carl Orff, “The Schulwerk-Its Origin and Aims” *Music Educators Journal*, 49 (1963), 69.