Sounds of the American West: Cowboys and Copland

The Basics

SUBJECT
Music

TARGETED GRADE LEVELS
Primary (2-5)

STANDARDS
National Standards for Music Education (NAfME):
1. Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
2. Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
5. Reading and notating music.
6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
7. Evaluating music and music performances.
8. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.
9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

The Lesson

Introduction
This general music unit will be taught in conjunction with classroom teachers’ history curriculum to supplement their units on Westward expansion & pioneers. Since different history curriculums may touch on Westward expansion at different grade levels, this unit attempts to include activities that could be adapted to multiple primary grade levels. The goal through this unit is to introduce students to the “sounds of the American West” through both folk and art music traditions, and for students to become comfortable with the use of musical selections as primary/secondary sources by which to study culture and lifestyles. Students will become familiar with listening excerpts from Copland’s Billy the Kid and Rodeo: “The Open Prairie,” “Street on a Frontier Town,” and “Hoedown”. They will also learn four new cowboy tunes, “Git Along Little Dogies,” “The Old Chisholm Trail,” “Goodbye Old Paint,” and “Great Grand-dad”. They will engage with these cowboy tunes by listening, singing & performing musical accompaniment, and finally by exploring Copland’s use of these folk tunes in his music.
OBJECTIVES

1. TSWBAT sing and perform musical accompaniment to various cowboy songs, identifying not only the importance of these traditional American Western tunes but also their purpose for performers or listeners.
2. Through musical selections, TSWBAT recognize the difficulties of pioneer travel and cowboy lifestyles.
3. TSWBAT recognize Aaron Copland’s use of folk tunes in selections from Billy the Kid and Rodeo, and identify musical elements essential to Copland’s “American sound.”
4. TSWBAT explain the use of music to portray accurate historical circumstances during westward expansion, as well as admiration or nostalgia for characters and places of the time period.

RESOURCES/MATERIALS

“Git Along Little Dogies” [traditional cowboy ballad]

“The Chisholm Trail” [traditional cowboy tune]
This song refers to the trail passageway from Texas to Kansas, over which thousands of cattle were driven through difficult circumstances. As Margaret Larkin explains,

“The song of the Chisholm Trail is the cowboy classic: its simple beating tune, its forthright couplets; ... its extemporaneous yelps, whoops and yips; its occasional departures from singing into shouting, are as exciting as the clatter of horses’ hooves on the hard prairie. There are hundreds of stanzas and dozens of tune variations according to locality and personal taste.”

“Goodbye, Old Paint” [traditional cowboy tune]
This tune was traditionally performed as a finale at dances; it often continued for as long as the performer could remember or improvise another stanza.
“Great Grand-dad” [traditional cowboy ballad]

**Web Resources**


http://www.atlantasymphony.org/aso/asoassets/downloadcenter/DNGStudentGud.pdf – Atlanta Symphony Orchestra’s Concert guide for their 2007-2008 Young People’s Concert series; includes lesson ideas for “Hoedown”

http://www.phoenixsymphony.org/uploads/HBAZ.pdf – Phoenix Symphony Orchestra’s study guide for their Young Person’s Concert series; includes information on Copland’s “Hoedown” and Grofe’s “Grand Canyon Suite,” among other Americana selections

http://www.wwnorton.com/college/music/listeninglab/shared/listening_guides/copland_billy_the_kid.pdf – Detailed listening guide for “Street in a Frontier Town” from Copland’s *Billy the Kid* suite


http://www.nyphil.org/education/for-schools/~/media/pdfs/education/1213/schools/SchoolDayConcerts2012.ashx – Incredibly thorough resource materials for teachers on *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*, from the New York Philharmonic’s 2012 series of school-day concerts

http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/program/episodes/five/cowboys.htm – PBS series “New Perspectives on the West”

www.vimeo.com/5020134 – clever animation which could be used to introduce Copland’s “Hoedown” from “Rodeo”

**Print Resources**


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/VOCABULARY

“Sweet Betsy from Pike”

**Song vocabulary:**
1. Pike (Pike County, Missouri)
2. Two yoke of cattle (cattle harnessed with wooden beam to pull loads)
3. Shanghai (type of rooster)
4. Yaller (yellow dog; a mutt)

**Discussion points:**
1. Why would Betsy and Ike want to head west?
2. Why would they take these particular animals along?
3. What challenges would they face on their journey?
4. How would the travel be different and more difficult than traveling today?

Git Along Little Dogies” : Cowboys' lifestyles & attitudes

**Song vocabulary:**
1. Dogies (cattle)
2. Cow puncher (cowboy)
3. Spurs (small spike worn on heel)
4. Whooping (yelling)
5. Brand (symbol put onto hides to mark cattle)

**Discussion points:**
1. In this song, what is the cowboy’s attitude about his job?
2. How might other cowboys have felt differently?
3. When do the cowboys start their trip? Why? *(more grass available in spring)*
4. What do the cowboys do to prepare for their trip?
5. In this song, what is it like for the cowboys on the trail?
6. What would it sound like, feel like, etc. to be on the trail with the cowboys?

“Goodbye, Old Paint” : The importance of horses

**Discussion points:**
1. What is a “paint” horse?
2. What was a cowboy’s horse’s job on the trail?
3. What might happen if a cowboy’s horse was stolen, hurt, or lost on the trail?
4. In this song, where does the cowboy tell his horse he’s headed?

“Great Grand-dad” : Legendary/tall-tale characters of the West

**Song vocabulary:**
1. Wagon-tongue (wooden piece sticking out from front of wagon to yoke horses/mules)
2. Redskins (offensive term for American Indians)
3. Duck soup (easy task)
4. Corn pone (cornbread)

Discussion questions:

1. What were the challenges grand-dad faced on the frontier?
2. What kind of character was grand-dad?
3. What modern luxuries would you miss if you lived grand-dad’s lifestyle?
4. What makes a song like this remain popular?

PROCEDURES

Part One: Setting the Scene – Headed West on the Open Prairie

Introduce “The Open Prairie” from Copland’s *Billy the Kid Suite*

- Define “prairie” and “frontier”
- Pair-share: what have you already learned about the settlers’ lives on the prairie?
- Why did the pioneers want to move westward?
- Ask students to picture themselves on the prairie, exploring the wild frontier. Imagine you are on a long, slow journey, traveling vast distances by foot, horse, or wagon. What might you be seeing and hearing?
- What challenges might you be facing?
- How might you be feeling? (Tired, brave, hopeful, etc.)
- How would your wagon be moving/how does the scene make you want to walk?
- Show map to give geographical context for westward expansion
- Share brief biographical information about Copland. Students will listen as teacher reads the short biography, with the instruction to “pick out one fact I share that you think nobody else will choose”; then they will each share their fact.

First listen of "On the Open Prairie":

- Play beginning excerpt of “The Open Prairie,” sharing projected images of prairie landscapes (such as: [http://www.flickr.com/photos/20928489@N02/3858766375/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/20928489@N02/3858766375/)).
- Pause & discuss: How does the music sound different than you expected?
- Draw attention to use of minor thirds & fanfare-sounds:
  - Copland fills his prairie music with intervals of minor thirds, which gives the music a melancholy sound.
  - Guide several volunteers in playing a minor third on classroom instruments.
- Also point out the fanfare-like, ascending major triad figure that is reused by both woodwind and brass instruments

- Invite students to move responsively to the rest of the recording:
  1. Model appropriate movement: slow plodding steps, swaying triple meter feel.
  2. Encourage close listening for the following aspects of the music:
     - Minor third calls by horn & flute (sounds like? bird's call, etc.)
     - Sudden, fortissimo entrance of bass drum & cymbals (sounds like? buffalo stampeding, etc.)
  3. Continue recording & invite responsive movement.

“Sweet Betsy from Pike”
- Sing first verse and chorus

  Song vocabulary:
  7. Pike (Pike County, Missouri)
  8. Two yoke of cattle (cattle harnessed with wooden beam to pull loads)
  9. Shanghai (type of rooster)
 10. Yaller (yellow dog; a mutt)

  Discussion points:
  11. Why would Betsy and Ike want to head west?
  12. Why would they take these particular animals along?
  13. What challenges would they face on their journey?
  14. How would the travel be different and more difficult than traveling today?

Second listen of “On the Open Prairie”:
- Re-play the recording while students draw a picture from their imagination of what the open prairie scene evoked by the music would look like.
- Depending on age level, could use a three-page “Exploring the West: Passport Booklet” constructed by the teacher & given to students in which to draw their picture on the first page labeled “on the Open Prairie”. Throughout the unit students could get their passport pages “stamped” as they “visit” the “Street in a Frontier Town” and the “Hoedown” and do similar listening/drawing activities with those two Copland selections.

Wrap-up:
- Pair-share drawings
- Guide review discussion of how Copland musically conveys the brave and difficult journey westward in “The Open Prairie”
• Extension song -- “Home on the Range”

**Part Two: Meeting the Characters -- Songs of the Cowboys**

**Introduction: Charles Marion Russell's painting, “Jerked Down”**

Background information about the scene:

- Cattle called “longhorns” because of their prominent horns
- Much of the Midwest was “open range” – not fenced or huge ranches
- Ranchers branded cattle by burning a symbol onto their hide to tell which longhorns were theirs
- Huge market for cattle in the East, but ranchers had to drive the cattle to “cow towns” where there were railroad junctions which could get them east
- Some drives went through most of the Midwest... i.e. Chisholm Trail, from central Texas to Kansas.
- Hard, lonely work for cowhands – rode long days through dust storms, rain, etc.
- Cowhands wore wide-brimmed hats and leather leggings called chaps
- They used lassos to rope cows that strayed from the herd
- Dangers: crossing swift rivers, cattle would stampede when scared

*Discussion points (for painting):*
1. What are the cowboys doing in this painting? How are they working together?
2. What tools are they using to complete their work?
3. What is the painter trying to convey about cowboys?
4. What do you think it would feel like & sound like if we could make the painting come to life & be part of the scene?

**“Git Along Little Dogies” : Cowboys' lifestyles & attitudes**

• Listen and Discuss:
  1. Play the song while students’ eyes are closed:
     [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8cVriSCCYE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8cVriSCCYE) (“Roy Rogers” abbreviated version)
  2. Ask them to use their imagination & put themselves in the scene:
     - Who is singing?
     - Why are they singing this song?
     - What are they doing as they sing?
     - When are they singing: day or night, etc.?
     - Where are they singing: inside or out, summer or winter, etc.?
  3. Pair-share ideas about possible contexts for the song
• Teach “Git Along Little Dogies” (see attached song sheet)
• Teach students xylo & maraca ostinato to accompany chorus.
• Perform with ½ class singing & ½ accompanying; switch.

Song vocabulary:
15. Dogies (cattle)
16. Cow puncher (cowboy)
17. Spurs (small spike worn on heel)
18. Whooping (yelling)
19. Brand (symbol put onto hides to mark cattle)

Discussion points:
20. In this song, what is the cowboy’s attitude about his job?
21. How might other cowboys have felt differently?
22. When do the cowboys start their trip? Why? (more grass available in spring)
23. What do the cowboys do to prepare for their trip?
24. In this song, what is it like for the cowboys on the trail?
25. What would it sound like, feel like, etc. to be on the trail with the cowboys?

• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cfhQFL2ePw – link to Youtube clip of goofy rendition of the song by Arlo Guthrie, singing to a bunch of cows on the Muppet Show

Song, “The Chisholm Trail” : Cowboys’ occupation
• Teach song “The Chisholm Trail” (see attached song sheet)

Song vocabulary:
26. Chisholm Trail (trail stretching from Texas ranches to Kansas railheads)
27. Hoss (horse)
28. Punching cattle (herding cattle)

Discussion points:
1. What are some of the “troubles” the narrator tells you about?
2. What was the cowboy’s workday like?
3. What were the cowboy’s “tools of the trade”?
4. Why would cowboys want to sing on the trail?
5. When and where do you imagine the cowboys singing this song? What might they be doing as they sing?
6. What about this music makes it sound like “cowboy music”?

• Quote about cowboys’ use of music:
"The singing was supposed to soothe the cattle and it did... The two men on guard would circle around with their horses on a walk, if it was a clear night and the cattle was bedded down and quiet, and one man would sing a verse of a song, and his partner on the other side of the herd would sing another verse; and you'd go through a whole
song that way... I had a . . . partner in ’79; I’d sing and he’d answer, and we’d keep it up like that for two hours.” -- Teddy Blue Abbot

“Goodbye, Old Paint” : The importance of horses
- Teach “Goodbye, Old Paint” (see attached song sheet)

Discussion points:
6. What is a “paint” horse?
7. What was a cowboy’s horse’s job on the trail?
8. What might happen if a cowboy’s horse was stolen, hurt, or lost on the trail?
9. In this song, where does the cowboy tell his horse he’s headed?

“Great Grand-dad” : Legendary/tall-tale characters of the West
- Teach “Great Grand-dad” (see attached song sheet)

Song vocabulary:
5. Wagon-tongue (wooden piece sticking out from front of wagon to yoke horses/mules)
6. Redskins (offensive term for American Indians)
7. Duck soup (easy task)
8. Corn pone (cornbread)

Discussion questions:
9. What were the challenges grand-dad faced on the frontier?
10. What kind of character was grand-dad?
11. What modern luxuries would you miss if you lived grand-dad’s lifestyle?
12. What makes a song like this remain popular?

Part Three: Up the Trail -- “Frontier Town”

Pre-listening preparation
- Open by singing a few verses from “Chisholm Trail,” “Git Along Little Dogies,” “Goodbye Old Paint,” and “Great Grand-dad” to refresh their minds about the tunes.
- When cowboys finished their long cattle drives, they often stayed for a while in frontier towns to celebrate before returning home to the range. What do you imagine a “frontier town” would be like?
- Review “ballet”; pair-share an adjective to describe how they anticipate dancers would move in a ballet about a frontier town

First listen of “Frontier Town”
- Listen & draw: knowing only the title, students listen to the selection in its entirety and draw what they think the “frontier town” scene would look like.
Prior to listening, use questions to guide discussion/predictions of how Copland would musically evoke the following aspects of the scene:

1. As you listen to the music, imagine you are standing on the street in the frontier town. What are you seeing? What are you smelling? What are you hearing? Is it hot or cold; day or night; cloudy or sunny? How will the music make it sound so?
2. Does it sound like the street is busy, or empty? Is there any traffic on the street; what kind? How will the music make it sound so?
3. Does it sound like there are many people? What kind of characters are they? How will the music make it sound so?
4. What is the general mood of people on the street, if there are any? Does the mood change from the beginning to the end of the scene?

Second listen of “Frontier Town”

Set the scene (the following adapted from Copland’s notes on “Billy the Kid”):

We are about to listen again to the music which Mr. Copland wrote to depict the main street in a frontier town. You each had great & creative ideas about what the street looked like, but this time as we listen, I’d like you to know what the street really looked like in the ballet. Cowboys saunter into town, some on horseback, others on foot with their lassos. Some Mexican women do a jarabe, a traditional Mexican style of song and dance. Their dance is interrupted by a fight between two cowboys. The main character, Billy, steps out onto the street with his mother and they are drawn by the gathering crowd. The brawl turns ugly, the cowboys draw their guns, and in the melee Billy’s mother is accidentally shot. As you listen, try to hear the following things:

- Give bits of listening map (see following page), cut apart. Discuss what timbres and textures students might anticipate each piece to sound like; come up with a list of musical adjectives to anticipate each part of the listening map.
- Listen through the piece once, while students try to put the pieces together in the correct order.
- Discuss the listening maps students have constructed.
- What parts of this task were difficult? What parts were easy? Why?
- Give students a pre-fabricated listening map, with all the pieces correctly ordered.
- Listen a second time through the piece while students follow along with map
- Discuss the mental picture Copland paints of the frontier town through the “American sound” of his music.
LISTENING MAP: “FRONTIER TOWN” from BILLY THE KID SUITE

[AARON COPLAND]

1 Solo piccolo introduces “Great Grand-dad”

2 Oboe & trumpet introduce paraphrase of “Get Along Little Dogies”

3 Strings & woodwinds alternate shifting-meter tune with brass (A rickety wagon with uneven wheels rolling through town. The wagon passes out of town and its sound dies out to silence.)

4 Loud chords played by orchestra, punctuated with bass drum hits (Cowboys slam the saloon door and stagger out onto the street)

5 Strings introduce lively paraphrase of “Old Chisholm Trail,” along with woodblock (clip-clop sound like a lively horse trotting through town)

6 Trombones interject a dragging triplet melody (Cowboys lazily swinging their lassos over their heads in the street)

7 Strings play a jumpy accompaniment while woodwinds play “Great Grand-dad”; sleighbells in the background (Mail stagecoach rolls into town pulled by horses with bells on their harnesses)
CLOSURE
“Cowboy campfire” sing-along – review of all songs, their historical context, and their significance as primary sources, followed by a “cowboy celebration”: learning a simple line-dance to “Hoedown” from Copland’s “Rodeo.”

EVALUATION
Informal evaluations through observing students’ quality of participation in listening activities, singing, playing classroom instruments, response to listening excerpts, and classroom discussion.

REFLECTION
The purpose of this unit is for students to gain a richer understanding of the people, places, and cultures of American westward expansion by studying its music, both in primary sources (pioneer songs, cowboy songs) and secondary sources (the music of Aaron Copland, written in a later time period but exemplifying the “American sound” and borrowing from many period folk tunes).

1. Are students able to distinguish the difference between these types of sources?
2. Are the song activities age-appropriate and engaging for students? If not, how can I make the songs more applicable?
3. Are the students gaining both historical/cultural perspective AND musical knowledge from these activities?
4. What kinds of unintentional takeaway points are students gaining from this unit, and what can I add or pare down for next year?