

Music and Song in Discussion

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As most teachers find out, students love listening to music in the language classroom. It can also be a teaching tool. Often students hold strong views about music and students who are usually quiet can become very talkative when discussing it.

In many cases, the teacher plays a song and leads a discussion on the meaning of the lyrics in a song. This can be effective, but this is just one of the many ways that music or song can lead to a fruitful discussion. Some of the other aspects of music and songs are outlined below. Any one of these can be the basis of a class discussion.

Music

- Internal Structure

Music has its own internal structure - melody, harmony, rhythm, theme development, instrumentation, dynamics, etc. These can be discussed purely in terms of internal meaning as students explore the structure of the music. Alternatively, students can imagine the music as architecture, painting or some other visible form and discuss their images.

- Expression of Emotions

Music can effect us emotionally in many different ways. Four different ways that it might do so are given below. Students can discuss which emotions they feel and what makes them feel that way.

- Imitation of the Human Voice

The meaning of an utterance is often indicated by the tone of voice as well as the words. Music can imitate these tones to produce anger, fear, happiness and other emotions.

- Imitation of Human Movement

The weeping willow tree is considered to be sad because it resembles the stooped over figure of a person. In a similar way, a slow descending chromatic bass line can convey sadness. Funeral dirges are slow because they echo the slow procession of the people at a funeral. Marches move briskly to match the energy of soldiers going to war.

- Conventional Meaning

Some musical patterns and timbres are used to express particular emotions so often that we immediately associate them with that emotion. For example, minor keys often convey sadness. Similarly, trombones are often associated with solemn dignity and foreboding.

- By Induction

Some researchers believe that the energy of the song can transfer itself to our bodies through induction. For example, the anger or excitement of a punk song might be transferred through the raw harmonies and overwhelming volume.

- Representation of External Meanings

This is a rich area for discussion. Music has often been regarded as having no external meaning. However, composers are effected greatly by surrounding culture. In addition, music can become associated with personal or media experiences. It can be interesting for students to try to discuss the external meanings which they associated with the song. Five types of external meanings are discussed below.

- Music as a Reflection of Society and Culture

The current beliefs and conditions of society are always encoded in the music, either consciously or subconsciously by the composer. For example, during the Classical Period, concerts were usually given for small numbers of highly-educated aristocrats. During the Romantic Period, orchestration was increased because of the growing middle-class audiences and larger concert halls. More recently, particular areas have developed their own sound like Missisipi Blues or the LA sound which reflect certain aspects of the culture.

- Association with Personal Experiences

Many people have a few pieces of music or a genre that they can associate with particular memories or people.

- Association with Advertisements, Movies, etc.

Producers often use music in movies and advertisements and the music often becomes linked to this product. For example, an old blues song became closely associated with Levi's jeans a few years ago.

- o Program Music
Some music was written to accompany poems or paintings. For example, The Four Seasons by Vivaldi was written to a poem.
- o Sound Effects
The cannon in the 1812 Overture is a pretty clear indicator of military activity. Other common effects are the sound of a train, bird songs, etc.

Lyrics

Many of the above meanings also apply to lyrics, but lyrics also have their own unique meanings.

- Subject Matter
This is a big area and an appropriate song can lead to a discussion in almost any topic. For example, the Beatles' song Nowhere Man can lead to a discussion on laziness, dreams or alienation. The large number of possible interpretations and the ambiguity in many lyrics makes possibilities for extended discussions.
- Meanings of Song Vocabulary
Words may be used in new ways in songs. For example, Paul Simon sings about the 'Sound of Silence'. The Beatles sing about a 'Day Tripper' to refer to a short relationship. Cliches are often twisted or given a new meaning in songs such as Tom Petty's 'A Heart With A Mind Of Its Own'.
- Poetic Structure
Rhyming scheme, rhythm, use of alliteration, onomatopoeia and imagery are all useful subjects for discussion.
- Ambiguous People and Places in Songs
Often, song lyrics refer to 'you' and 'I' without the listener knowing who they are. Similarly, the place and time are often unspecified. Eliciting student opinions about these ambiguous items can make an interesting discussion.
- Songs as a Reflection of Culture
Even more than music, lyrics are a reflection of society and culture. For example, the lyrics of the 60's shows the changing values about sexual behaviour in society. Protest songs and street ballads describe society in a powerful manner.

Other Meanings

- Meanings Created in Performance
Different singers often bring different attitudes and meanings to a song. For example, Elvis's version of 'Always On My Mind' conveys feelings of regret, whereas the same song recorded by the Pet Shop Boys conveys a cynical attitude.
- Meanings Created in Pop Videos
Pop videos can often give insight into the meanings of songs and provide extra material for discussion.
- Meanings Created in Packaging
The same music can be popular or unpopular depending on how it is packaged and marketed. For example, Nigel Kennedy (a violin virtuoso) succeeded in selling classical music to teenagers by adopting the language, dress and mannerisms of pop stars.

Conclusions

I have outlined only a few of the possible directions that discussions can take. Various other ideas are also available in the source books listed below.

Useful Source Books

- Murphey, T. (1990) Music and Song. Oxford University Press.
- Griffiee, D. (1992) Songs in Action. Prentice Hall.
- Maley, A. and Duff, A. (1989) The Inward Ear. Cambridge University Press.