American Idol and the Music Classroom: A Means of Critiquing Music

By Jason D. Thompson

was not initially a fan of American Idol—perhaps other music educators have similar sentiments about the program—and I’ve heard many reasons given as justifications for not using its content as a resource for studying music. However, in recent years I’ve sought creative ways to connect the content of my music program with my students, whose musical interests are somewhat different than my own. One creative way to pique student interest and help students develop skills for analyzing music and music performances is through the American Idol television program. Discussions arising from lessons using this program have yielded significant educational rewards for my students.

As music classrooms experience an increase in the number of students from a variety of cultures, valuing the music of all cultures becomes increasingly important. The “melting pot” metaphor traditionally used to describe the blending of cultures in the United States has evolved into a “salad bowl” model, as the emphasis on cultural identity and awareness has increased. While both metaphors suggest connectivity between cultures, the latter illustrates the distinctiveness that exists in each. The term culture is sometimes used when describing race and geographic locations, but it also refers to the customs of a homogeneous group of people—our students, in this case.

The culture of today’s young people, often expressed through popular music, is frequently overlooked in public school music curricula. Perhaps this oversight results from the fact that popular music has not traditionally been viewed as having the same value as Western art music. Some music educators have not included popular music because they do not believe they are knowledgeable enough about this genre to teach it to students. Nonetheless, using popular music to teach music concepts, without imposing analytical methods from Western traditions, is a valuable way to extend the breadth of musical learning necessary for comprehensive programs.

Popular music is present to some extent at the elementary and secondary school levels. Examples of current practices are the presence of pop songs as resources in textbook series, students choosing pop vocal solos for a chorus concert, and a pep band’s rendition of a popular tune. Yet, popular music has not been fully embraced as a genre worthy of meaningful study, despite the justification provided by the Tanglewood Declaration of 1967 for including it in music curricula. According to Article 2 of the declaration, “Music of all periods, styles, forms, and cul-

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tures belongs in the curriculum. The musical repertory should be expanded to involve music of our time in its rich variety, including currently popular teenage music, avant-garde, American folk music, and the music of other cultures. Nonetheless, the inclusion of popular music remains minimal in K-12 music curricula.

Some students may have difficulty finding connections between their personal music preferences and the music taught in school music curricula. Often, the musical styles that students listen to, dance to, and perform outside school are very different from those learned in school settings. To address this disparity in instruction, the MENC Strategic Plan asserts that “music learned in school must be relevant in some way to the music experiences our students have outside the school.” In the preface to Bridging the Gap: Popular Music and Music Education, Bennett Reimer states that “including popular music as one dimension of a comprehensive general music education, and as an opportunity for specialized electives along with a variety of other opportunities, will bring school music programs into the real world of music as it actually exists.”

While including popular music in the curriculum may be challenging, innovative music educators recognize its value and have sought opportunities to incorporate it. With constructive effort and planning, teachers can use media promoting popular music genres, such as American Idol, to explore multiple popular music styles and provide a platform for critiquing music performances. This can help bridge the gap between the music preferences of today's students and the traditional musical offerings taught in secondary music curricula. The curriculum should be expanded to include the musical preferences of today's youth. Lessons using American Idol can also be effective tools for honing students' skills in evaluating musical performances with competency and integrity and for promoting curriculum integration and character education.

Seize the Teachable Moment

Reality television has become increasingly trendy in recent years. The fascination of seeing “the people next door” is continually reflected in the significantly high ratings of several reality television programs, particularly American Idol, the most-watched program in America. According to a Nielsen Research Report, an average of thirty million viewers per episode watched American Idol during 2006. Although the programming of fourteen networks is devoted entirely to children, USA Today reported that American Idol—a program not targeting child audiences—was the most popular program among children.

Consequently, most students come to music classrooms eager to share their opinions of the performances. While not every student views or is interested in American Idol, all students can learn to analyze music and critique music performances. The high viewer ratings and apparent student interest offer a great teachable moment. Teachers speak of the teachable moment in education as that time when the learning atmosphere is most conducive to teaching an important concept or lesson. Given this definition, student interest in popular music and American Idol can be melded to teach students to crit-
tique music. Two of the National Standards for Music Education require students to “listen to, analyze, and describe music” (Standard 6) and “evaluate music and music performances” (Standard 7). Using American Idol as an educational tool, music educators can develop students’ skills for critiquing music performances while capitalizing on their interest in popular culture.

**Essential Questions for Critiquing Performances**

An essential element of making music is performing. Actively participating in music making in many cultures and settings is a central part of the community, collaborative, and cooperative learning of the people. The possibilities for musical exploration using American Idol performances are numerous, especially when students are given specific music components to identify while viewing teacher-selected excerpts from the program (copied according to U.S. copyright law). These musical components can best be understood through asking an essential question—a useful tool to help students focus daily instruction on meaningful goals—and can be incorporated into classroom discussions (see sidebar on the characteristics of essential questions). Essential questions are written to probe for deeper meaning and to educate students through inquiry-based learning. Essential questions can aid students in analyzing performance techniques, vocal timbres, historical relevance, song and text selection, musical themes, and the use of instrumentation to enhance the overall performance (see sidebar on examples of questions for the music classroom).

Since these questions have no obviously correct answers, they provide a foundation for multiple solutions, enhancing cooperative learning and aiding students in exploring the justifications for their particular beliefs. Providing these parameters helps students focus their ideas, fosters critical and imaginative thinking, enhances personal and social skills, shapes values, and encourages reflection. Such questions also promote independent thinking and can help extend student learning beyond the classroom.

Questions such as those shown in the sidebar provide a framework for organizing thoughts that emerge from viewing segments of the program. The ideas generated by students using questions like these can be written out as critiques and later published in school or local arts columns. They can also be included in daily school announcements to showcase student work and promote the arts—allowing the individual voices of students in an ensemble setting to be heard.

**Musicality versus Commercialism**

Since musicality is evidenced once the final American Idol contestants are selected, teaching units in music critiquing may be far more beneficial at that time. Can the show’s content lend itself to teaching students to analyze music and music performances? The television program includes a variety of components that can be formulated into essential questions for music instruction. Topics might include:

- Comparing and contrasting vocal timbres of performers
- Connecting songs to pivotal historical events
- Uncovering stylistic similarities of songs used in theme episodes (e.g., the 1950s or '80s)
- Classifying songs by genre (e.g., musical, big band, or disco)
- Using instrumentation and live bands to complement the voice rather than compete with it.

Addressing some of the competitive aspects of the show could also help prepare students to exemplify desired behavioral characteristics necessary for participation in entrance auditions and adjudication festivals. Considering the content contained in the program and the required skills for music critiquing, lessons using American Idol are more appropriate for use in secondary choral, instrumental, or general music classrooms than in elementary general music classrooms.

Some music educators, administrators, and parents may have genuine concerns about a teacher’s use of American Idol as a classroom resource because of its content. Concerns may include the use of music sometimes viewed as nonstandard for public school music curriculums, the sometimes-questionable conduct and appearance of contestants and judges, and the mocking of performances that is prevalent during early episodes. Indeed, these issues must be addressed with both parents and administrators prior to introductory lessons, perhaps with a letter from the teacher explaining the objectives and reasons for using American Idol to assist students in analyzing music. In addition, failure to deal with the commercial aspects of American Idol would be an error of judgment.

Since statistics from viewer polls
indicate that a significant number of American families watch the program, lessons using American Idol can be another occasion to promote parental involvement in their children's arts education. As students dialogue about the musical aspects of the program in school settings, they can share new skills in music criticism with their families while watching such shows at home.

American Idol showcases live music performance, especially the type of performance that occurs in the popular music industry. Honestly articulating the nature of this industry, which not only includes the act of making music but also its competitive aspects, is a critical step in the process of developing good music listeners and model performers.

Curriculum Integration

The accountability measures mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 encourage reinforcement of concepts through cross-disciplinary instruction, which allows students to comprehend the interrelatedness of subjects. American Idol can not only help spark student interest, but it can allow integration of music with other academic subjects. For example, the format of American Idol lends itself easily to discussions about civics, particularly voting practices and the foundations of criteria by which voters select candidates. As students gain experience in music critiquing, they will be better equipped to cast an informed vote for those who demonstrate proficient musical techniques. In addition, students will be able to evaluate performances and advocate for the best quality of music in the media, influencing their peers with a far more persuasive voice than that of a music teacher.

For years, music teachers have demonstrated the connectivity of music to other subject areas, evidenced through lessons that are multifunctional in content and pedagogical approach. National Standard 8 states that the learner will "understand relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts." Creating opportunities for students to find the connections that exist between the music concepts presented in American Idol performances and those of other subjects is valuable for students' growth and learning.

Cross-disciplinary learning can occur by using American Idol for learning throughout the school. Students could encounter concepts from other subjects related to American Idol while concentrating on music components in the music classroom. Curriculum integration occurs in such disciplines as history, language arts, and life skills. For example, students can examine the historical events that took place when a particular song was composed and study composer biographies.

In language arts, students can examine the texts of songs, write reflectively in journals about the songs' main ideas, and ultimately compose new song texts. Another language arts connection might be developing interview questions to learn about the musical background of the contestants. Students can disseminate newly acquired information in a multimedia presentation. There are many other possibilities for using American Idol as a springboard to comprehensive learning rather than as mere entertainment.

Life Lessons

Character education is increasingly being included in American public school curricula. Undoubtedly, teachers play a critical role in shaping the moral conduct and citizenship of students, and music teachers have music as a distinctive medium through which to help students accomplish the goal of character education. While the primary purpose for using American Idol is to help students hone their skills for critiquing music, the show also can be used to sharpen students' awareness of suitable performance etiquette. Critiquing the behaviors of contestants who demonstrate either positive or negative character traits is a valuable activity.

American Idol provides an opportunity to discuss certain life lessons. Topics in this category could include setting goals, the benefits of hard work, open-mindedness, cooperation and teamwork, and stage presence. More dialogue might include self-evaluation and improvement, creative thinking, the desire to perform, determination, and a greater understanding and respect for culture and history. While these skills can be obtained through participation in nonmusical activities, the music classroom provides an especially appropriate forum for including these important components of character education and for helping students make choices about their musical lives.

A Bridge to Popular Music

Music educators can provide experiences with music that connect with students through careful study of the popular music showcased in American Idol. Widespread interest in the program creates an excellent teachable moment for teachers to show students how to analyze and critique the music performed by the contestants. Using American Idol in the classroom also can provide a bridge to teaching the music of the American past and to cross-disciplinary curriculum integration. As a result of incorporating popular music into the music curriculum, music educators might even be "idolized" for being in touch with the young people they teach.
Notes
4. MENC Strategic Plan (July 2002), www.menc.org/information/admin/strategicplan.html.
10. In accordance with the "fair use" provisions of copyright law, teachers may copy American Idol to use for instructional purposes. To avoid copyright issues, the excerpt should be (1) shown in the course of "face-to-face" teaching activities, (2) viewed within ten consecutive school days of the broadcast, and (3) destroyed after forty-five days. See www.copyright.gov/title17/92chap1.html#110 (accessed May 23, 2007). For fair use requirements, see www.copyright.gov/fls/f1102.html (accessed May 23, 2007).