GRADE 7-8: THE ARTS

CONTEMPORARY FIRST NATIONS AND INUIT MUSIC: POWWOW STEP AND SOLO THROAT SINGING

Purpose: Students will compare and contrast traditional and contemporary First Nations powwow music and Inuit throat singing. They will consider the cultural influences and significance of contemporary music by powwow step musicians: A Tribe Called Red and solo throat singer Tanya Tagaq.

Instructional method(s): listening, comparing and contrasting, class discussion (students may work in small groups or as a class)

Estimated time: 60 minutes

Activity:
1. Begin the lesson by writing the following quote on the front board: “My people will sleep for 100 years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back.”—Louis Riel, July 4, 1885

2. Ask students:
   a. Who is Louis Riel?
   b. What do they think of the quote?
   c. What does traditional Aboriginal music sound like?
   d. What does contemporary Aboriginal music sound like?
   e. Have you noticed a renaissance in Aboriginal music?
   f. Do you know any Aboriginal musicians?

3. Tell students: Recently, Aboriginal musicians have received recognition in Canada for their unique styles that mix traditional and contemporary music. A trio of DJs from Ottawa named A Tribe Called Red won the 2014 Juno Award for breakthrough group of the year for their powwow step music. Additionally, throat singer Tanya Tagaq from Cambridge Bay (Ikaluktuutiak), Nunavut won the 2014 Polaris Music Prize, which honours, celebrates and rewards creativity and diversity in Canadian recorded music. Today we will listen to traditional powwow, powwow step, traditional throat singing and solo singing to compare and contrast their musical elements, dynamics and styles.

4. Begin by introducing students to traditional powwow music. Tell students that traditionally, powwow music is performed only at powwows, a ceremony where food, music and dancing are shared. Each First Nation has their own distinct traditions. However, some common threads are found throughout. Four to 12 men or women sit in a circle around a large bass drum. The musicians strike the drum in unison in a fixed rhythmic patterns while they sing songs that are initiated by one of them. Pitch levels fall throughout the song which last about five minutes. In some First Nations, women’s participation was traditionally restricted to supportive roles. They would stand in a circle behind the men and sing an octave higher than the men.

(Note: Any of the five videos will work as an example. However, the third example is only audio and less traditional in style. The fourth and fifth examples show how a female supports the music.)

Ask students:
   a. Describe what you saw and heard.
   b. What were the instrument(s) used?
   c. How did singing compliment the instrument(s)?
   d. What was done in unison?
   e. What was performed individually?
   f. Describe the tempo, rhythm, dynamic and pitch.

5. Now introduce students to the music of A Tribe Called Red. Show students a performance of A Tribe Called Red joined by a hoop dancer from CBC’s Studio Q:
   www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEZIUVFKHyk

Ask students:
   a. Describe what you saw and heard.
   b. What were the instrument(s) used?
   c. Describe the tempo, rhythm, dynamic and pitch.
   d. What were the similarities between traditional powwow music and A Tribe Called Red’s “The Road”?
   e. What music styles did the DJ’s mix and incorporate?

Show students CBC’s The National’s “Only in Canada segment on A Tribe Called Red:
   www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0S3wP-8VFw

Ask students:
   a. Who are A Tribe Called Red?
   b. What do they want people to get out of listening to their music?
   c. What started electric powwow?
   d. Why did they want to create a space for urban Aboriginals?
   e. How do they push musical boundaries?
   f. How do they want to change how native culture is seen?
   g. How does the “music speak for them”?
   h. Has your perspective of First Nations powwow music changed?
6. Introduce students to traditional Inuit throat singing. Throat singing is a friendly competition or game between two women who are facing each other. One woman begins with short rhythmic patterns of husky chanting and low grunting, made through inhalations and exhalations. The second woman layers another rhythmic pattern on top. The two women continue trying to outlast the other. A single rendition usually lasts between 1 and 3 minutes.

Share an example with students: http://icor.ottawainuitchildrens.com/node/25

Ask students:
   a. Describe what you saw and heard.
   b. What were the instrument(s) used?
   c. What was done in unison?
   d. What was performed individually?
   e. Describe the tempo, rhythm, dynamic and pitch.

7. Introduce students to Tanya Tagaq. Play a song from Tagaq’s album “Animism” http://music.cbc.ca/#!/blogs/2014/5/First-Play-Tanya-Tagaq-Animism (Note: “Umingmak” and “Rabbit” are good example tracks to share with students.)

Ask students:
   a. Describe what you heard.
   b. How did Tanya Tagaq use her voice and breathing?
   c. What instruments accompanied Tagaq’s throat singing?
   d. Why do you think these instruments were chosen?
   e. How do they complement and enhance Tagaq’s throat singing?
   f. Describe the tempo, rhythm, dynamic and pitch.
   g. What other music styles does Tagaq incorporate?
   h. What were the similarities between traditional throat singing and Tagaq’s version?
   i. How has Tagaq changed throat singing?
   j. In an interview about her music Tagaq said “I like to live in a world that’s not supposed to be.” How does this come through in her music?
   k. Has your perspective of Inuit throat singing changed?
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to the lesson plans, share these resources with your students:

Canadian Encyclopedia

- “Powwow” www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/powwow/

CBC Music:

- A Tribe Called Red performs in Studio Q https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEZIUvFKHyk
- “Only in Canada: A Tribe Called Red” CBC National News https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOS3wP-8VFw
- Polaris Music Prize http://polarismusicprize.ca/about/
- Northern Images Communities “Cape Dorset, Nunavut”
  www.northernimages.ca/Artists-Communities/Communities/17748/Cape%20Dorset,Nunavut.aspx