



Language Can Be *Music* to Students' Ears

BY PATRICIA KONING

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the first in a series on using the arts in the language classroom. Here, we focus specifically on using music to enhance the acquisition of language skills and cultural competence. In the April issue of The Language Educator, look for an article on using theater and drama in language education.

When David McCall came up with the idea for “Schoolhouse Rock!” 40 years ago, he was tapping into what is now a well-known phenomenon—the connection between music and learning. McCall noticed that one of his sons was having trouble remembering multiplication tables, yet had memorized the lyrics to countless rock songs.

Many studies—as well as a generation of kids who grew up with “Schoolhouse Rock!” interspersed among Saturday morning cartoons—have demonstrated that music aids learning. Teachers of all subjects use music to calm their students, set a mood, and focus concentration.

Music is especially useful to language teachers. In addition to the “general learning” uses, music can reinforce language and grammar lessons, encourage creative thought in the target language, and provide a window into the culture of the target language.

“For me, it’s a no brainer,” says Nicole Naditz, a French teacher at Bella Vista High School in Fair Oaks, CA. “I personally love music, so I use it to liven up my classroom. The silver lining is that music can be an excellent way to practice vocabulary and grammar structures.”

For Nancy Gadbois, a French teacher at Cathedral High School in Springfield, MA, music brings an almost magical transformation into her classroom.

“When the music comes on, the kids think they are on holiday,” she says. “They think it is time for fun and games. We might as well be tossing a ball around the classroom—they just don’t associate activities using music with the other learning we do.”

Music doesn’t just fool students into enjoying the study of verb tenses, it also activates parts of the brain used in the study of language. A whole body of research has shown that learning music and learning a language employ similar cognitive processes. Dr. Joanne Loewy, director of the Louis Armstrong Center for Music and Learning at the Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City, has conducted extensive research on music therapy. Her findings, however, are relevant for language teachers.

Her concept, the Musical Stages of Speech, proposes that language should be considered not in a cognitive context, but in a musical one. She describes the cries, babbles, and coos of an infant as “the earliest dimension of language that is used and understood by children.” If music is a guiding principle in acquiring a first language, it follows that music also plays a role in acquisition of subsequent languages.

Author Susanna Zaraysky believes that music has enabled her to quickly learn new languages. She first became aware of this phenomenon when studying Portuguese as a young adult. “I was listening to a Portuguese radio station every day while driving to and from work. Without even realizing it, I was picking up vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciation,” she recalls.

She had similar experiences with language acquisition and music while living in Budapest, Hungary, and Sarajevo, Bosnia.

In 2009, Zaraysky turned her experiences into a book, *Language is Music (El Idioma es Música* in Spanish), and has given presentations on her ideas at the U.S. Department of State



ABOVE: Nicole Naditz and her class singing carols in French.

Lesson Plans = Two Grammy Tickets

and universities including Stanford University and the University of California, Berkeley.

Her book is a collection of tips on using media (e.g., listening to music and radio podcasts, watching TV and movies, participating in online language exchange and community events) to learn a second language. She suggests that passive activities, like listening to a radio station in the target language while driving or keeping the television news on in the background while preparing dinner, can pay big dividends.

Every language has a beat, says Zaraysky. "If you listen to the language as music and pay attention to the rhythm, flow, accentuation, and timing of the words, you are more likely to easily learn the language and have a good accent," she explains. "We can also learn grammar by listening to music because the sentence pattern in music lyrics is likely to stick in our memory. We are all like our own radio stations emitting sounds and hearing sounds within a certain range of frequency; we have to expand the range of sounds that we hear in order to speak in another language."

Music in the Classroom

Just like any other educational tool, teachers must carefully work music into lesson plans and use it to support desired outcomes. Naditz breaks her lessons into activities for pre-listening, while listening, and post-listening. "Pre-listening is important, even with Advanced classes," she says. "You have to prime the students for the vocabulary or grammar structures you want them to understand." In her pre-listening activities, Naditz likes to give her students a preview of the song they are about to study to get their minds working. Using *wordle.net*, she creates a word cloud from the song's lyrics and has her students predict the theme of the song. Or she will show students a music video with no sound and have them guess at the story line.

For teachers just starting to incorporate music, the general advice is to start slow. "Look for a song with simple lyrics and take baby steps. Try to develop one song a semester and soon you'll have a repertoire of a half dozen songs," says Gadbois. "And you don't need a huge catalog of songs. I often use the same song for all of the different levels that I teach. For lower levels, I'll supply a word bank for cloze activities and take away that support with Advanced students."

Olga Mancuso Skeem, Italian teacher at John Hanson French Immersion School in Oxon Hills, MD, has had great success with opera.

When Nicole Naditz became a high school French teacher 17 years ago, she never guessed that her classroom plans would one day land her a seat at the 2011 Grammy Awards. "This is one way that music has energized my classroom," she says. "My students formed a committee to decide what I should wear!"

Last fall, Naditz entered the first annual Jane Ortner Educating Through Music Awards, facilitated by the Grammy Museum's Education Programs Office. The award was established to honor Jane Ortner, who the Grammy Museum describes as "a devoted and beloved public school teacher who recognized the critical importance of music in the education of students at all levels."

The contest is designed to honor teachers who use music as a way to teach content standards. A panel of teachers and music industry professionals judged the submissions based on creativity and teachability.

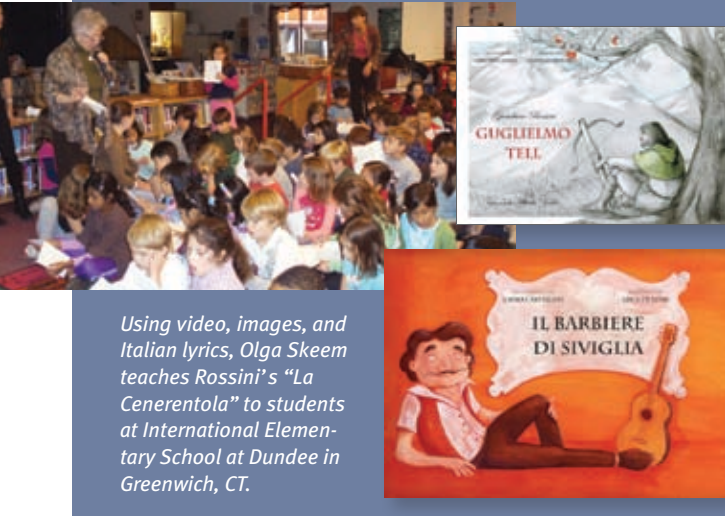
What caught Naditz's eye was not the chance to attend the Grammys on February 13 at Staples Center in Los Angeles, but the fact that the top submissions might be included in an online or print resource available to all teachers. "My aim was to make it into that resource, so that when it comes out world languages will be right there alongside English, math, and other subjects," she says. "Language is a core skill, but it is virtually invisible in general resources."

The majority of the submissions came from English Language Arts teachers, but the submissions represented all grades and subjects. Naditz overshot her goal, winning the grand prize for her submission, "Note-worthy Language: Using music to build second language proficiency and cultural knowledge."

Her 15-page submission covered pre-listening activities and using music to practice learned vocabulary and structures, demonstrate understanding of learned vocabulary and structures, facilitate student creativity in the target language, provide a window to authentic cultures that speak the language, and study themes of cultural and societal interest. In an appendix, she gave examples of how a teacher might implement these concepts using "She's Leaving Home" by John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

"I'm happy for the opportunity to get world languages into the public view," says Naditz. "And the Grammys? That's a once in a lifetime experience that I won't pass up."

Note: Look for an account of Nicole Naditz's Grammy experience in a future issue of *The Language Educator*.



Using video, images, and Italian lyrics, Olga Skeem teaches Rossini's "La Cenerentola" to students at International Elementary School at Dundee in Greenwich, CT.

For young students, she suggests waiting until second or third grade and then introducing opera in very short segments.

Skeem recommends the sextet 'Questo è un nodo avviluppato' from the second act of Gioachino Rossini's *Cinderella* as a good place to start.

"I divide the children into groups and have them practice the line and then say it together, just like it is performed in the opera," she explains. "Then I show them the video and they can understand the lyrics and how the music mimics the confusion in the narrative."

When working with a new song, Naditz first studies the lyrics very closely. "I print out the lyrics and then analyze them, looking for vocabulary and grammar that might match with a certain level," she says. "Then, as with any lesson, I start with the outcome I want and design pre- and post-listening activities that will guide and focus the students towards the concept I am teaching."

She also only uses authentic music. "This is a personal choice. There is an industry to create music for practicing language, but I find it more valuable to use authentic music so students see and hear the language as it is spoken by native speakers while also gaining insight into the cultures that speak the language," explains Naditz.

Sing a Song of Culture

Music can act as an important portal to the culture of the target language. Through contemporary and historical music, students are exposed to the customs, idioms, icons, history, and myths of a culture.

Skeem has vivid memories of attending her first opera as a child in Italy. After teaching adults for many years, in 2006 she turned her focus to younger students. Part of her motivation was to bring rich culture into the lives of children. Opera provided the perfect intersection of music, language, and culture.

"Opera is a way to introduce mythology, geography, and cultural norms. It helps stimulate critical thinking," she says. "Opera is also something that many young people have never heard of or know very little about. There are several career opportunities in the world of opera that are extremely intriguing for young people. As a teaching instrument, the novelty really captures the children's attention."

For example, the overture from Rossini's *William Tell* is a captivating piece of music—many people can remember this as the

Lone Ranger theme. But that opera also provides a venue to discuss Switzerland's history and the broader themes of independence and tyranny. In 2008, Skeem began using books developed by LaMa House Publishing. Using vivid illustrations, the books present well-known operas in abbreviated form simultaneously in four languages: Italian, English, and two others from among French German, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish.

Skeem also finds opera useful in boosting confidence in younger students. "With beginners, I work on basic vocabulary that they'll hear in a selection," she explains. "Then when the students recognize 'bravo,' 'bravissimo,' and other similar expressions repeated in *The Barber of Seville*, they feel like they are conquering the language."

Opera also has great value for older students. "Opera is embedded with so much culture that serves as great preparation for IB [International Baccalaureate] programs and AP [Advanced Placement] exams," says Skeem. "For example, Mozart's *Così fan tutte* draws from Shakespeare, Boccaccio, Ovid, and Greek mythology."

These practices are by no means limited to K–12 education. At Northwestern University in Chicago, Ingrid Zeller, a senior lecturer in the German department, uses opera and classical and modern music to teach culture. "The German language is so tightly coupled with music, especially as you get into the Advanced levels," she says. "Classical music has a rich history in German culture."

In 2002, when three German operas—*Hansel and Gretel*, *Parsifal*, and *The Magic Flute*—were staged in Chicago, she taught a German language class called German Through Opera. This opportunity allowed Zeller to delve deeply into the lyrics and themes of the three operas and provide the students with the unique and exciting experience of attending live performances.

Last spring, with Jesse Rosenberg, an associate professor of musicology, she piloted a unique class that combined intensive basic German with introductory musicology. "We conceived of the class as a way to prepare students to study abroad in Vienna," explains Zeller. "There wasn't a language requirement for that program, but we wanted to give the students a foundation in both German and Vienna's rich musical history." On alternate days, the students attended Zeller's German class and Rosenberg's musicology class, taught in English. As a culminating project for the term, the students presented an evening demonstrating what they had learned through musical performances, skits, and videos. The course was well received and attracted interest beyond those students planning to study abroad in Vienna. Zeller and Rosenberg are working to integrate the two disciplines even more tightly in a course they plan to offer in the spring quarter.

This month, Zeller's students will get a unique spin on Goethe and Friedrich Schiller when the German rapper DOPPEL-U performs at Northwestern. DOPPEL-U got his big break in 2005 when at the request of a writer's society, he transformed 200-year-old writing by Schiller into rap to celebrate Schiller Year. He has since added Goethe to his repertoire, creating a musical style that seems tailor-made for students of German.

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LEFT: French students sing the music of Carole Fredericks in front of their class. RIGHT: Nancy Gadbois and Connie Fredericks-Malone share the legacy of Carole Fredericks.

The Carole D. Fredericks Foundation provides teachers with authentic French language materials and lesson plans and related methodologies. The foundation sponsors various projects including the Carole Fredericks Contest, along with the Consulate General of France in Boston, where students from New England states at all levels compete as individuals and in groups creating essays and videos related to the music of Fredericks. Find out more at www.consulfrance-boston.org/spip.php?article1859. The deadline for submissions is **March 25, 2011**.

A Hometown Hero

Nancy Gadbois taught for many years in the Springfield public schools before discovering what would become her most powerful teaching tool—the music of world-renowned blues singer Carole Fredericks, who was born and raised in the city. It all started in 1996, because her students wore school jackets bearing the name “Springfield, MA” on a school trip to Paris.

“Wherever we went, locals and tourists would ask if we were truly from that city. We assumed, incorrectly, that France and its visitors knew that our city was home to the Basketball Hall of Fame,” explains Gadbois. “Unknown to any of us, the song ‘Un Deux Trois,’ in which Carole mentions her roots in Springfield, from the album ‘Fredericks Goldman Jones’ was at the top of the music charts in Europe and almost impossible to purchase.”

She found that Fredericks’s music resonated with the students and provided a platform on which to teach vocabulary, grammatical structure, and critical thinking in French. One of her favorite songs from that same album is “Né en 17à Leidenstadt,” which discusses choices in life and facing challenges.

“Pedagogically speaking, ‘Leidenstadt’ is a powerful way to introduce and develop ‘si’ clause sentences in an Intermediate- or Advanced-level class,” explains Gadbois. “My students prefer the honest discussion devoted to difficult questions about ‘following the crowd’ and having the ability to stand firm in the face of opposing views on racism, xenophobia and intolerance.”

Her students also connect to Fredericks’s life story on a personal level. After achieving success in the United States as a studio blues singer, Fredericks emigrated from the United States to France to pursue a career in music. Just 27 years old, she knew a handful of

French words and with no money for tutoring, immersed herself completely in the language and culture. From this daring headfirst dive, Fredericks rose to the top of the hit parade in France, Europe, and Africa.

“She adopted France and Senegal, the people, and the language with gusto and perfection, as evidenced in her brilliant singing and popularity with the masses,” writes Gadbois in a paper titled “Using the Music of Carole Fredericks in the French Classroom,” which can be found online at the Carole Fredericks Foundation website (www.carolefredericksfoundation.org/pdfs/gadbois-article.pdf).

A few years ago, a guidance counselor brought into Gadbois’s classroom a new student who had recently moved from Senegal. “I had a Carole Fredericks DVD playing, which he recognized immediately. He commented on what a great French singer she is,” she recalls. “He refused to believe that she was not a native French speaker and instead was born in Springfield.”

It was clear that students in Springfield could connect with Fredericks as a hometown hero. The test of whether the power of her music would hold up for other students came in 1998, at an American Association of Teachers of French (AATF) conference.

At the AATF awards dinner in Montreal, at which Gadbois received the award for Best Secondary Teacher of French, she was seated next to the Best New Teacher of French, Christina Popowski. The two hit it off and Gadbois agreed to present Carole Fredericks to Popowski’s students at Harper High School in Chicago that fall while she was in town for the ACTFL Convention.

Harper High School was not only far removed from Springfield, it was also in one of Chicago’s roughest neighborhoods.

“I wasn’t sure what to expect, but the kids just ate it up,” says Gadbois. “Their positive embrace of the Carole Fredericks story provided the impetus to begin an incredible journey that has been the highlight of my teaching career.”

Fredericks died of heart attack just a few years later, in 2001, at the age of 49. She was laid to rest in the historic Montmartre Cemetery in Paris alongside numerous French luminaries such as the painter Edgar Degas, solidifying her place in French culture.

“At the local memorial, I told Carole’s sister Connie Fredericks-Malone how I was using her sister’s music in the classroom,” says Gadbois. “That began a wonderful relationship with the family that is still going strong.”

She began creating educational materials in collaboration with the Carole D. Fredericks Foundation. In 2009, Gadbois was decorated *Chevalier* in the l’Ordre des Palmes Académiques du Ministère de L’Education Nationale in part for her work with the music of Carole Fredericks.



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Music also provides a way of exposing students to different cultures and countries where people speak the language they are studying. This can be especially important with French and Spanish, as those languages are spoken throughout multiple continents. Gadbois recently began focusing on French singers of Arabic descent, such as Amina, from Tunisia, and Cheb Mami, an Algerian singer who sang a duet, "Desert Rose," with Sting in 2000. "For the first time in my teaching career, my students are quite well-informed about the French-speaking Arabic world," she says.

Finding the 5 Cs in Music

Music provides a great entryway into the national *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*. "Music is not by itself standards-based," says Naditz. "But it's quite easy, even natural, to relate music to the standards. Music gives you access to information that is only available to the communities that speak that language." Before winter break, her students visited other classrooms to sing French Christmas carols—a great application of the Communities goal.

In her paper published in the *AATF National Bulletin* in 2002 and available online, Gadbois explains how teaching the music of Carole Fredericks [see sidebar on p. 35] allows her to incorporate the standards, especially Communications, Connections, and Communities into her teaching. Listening to Francophone music and reading or listening to song lyrics in French involves Standard 1.2, Interpretive Communication. When the students express to one another their understanding of a song's theme and include their emotions after studying the lyrics, Standard 1.1 Interpersonal Communication may occur.

In the paper, Gadbois writes about how the research involved in the theme inherent in "Leidenstadt," a song by the Fredericks Goldman Jones trio, furthers the historical knowledge under the Connections goal, Standard 3.1. "By watching a *Parler d'sa vie* interview in which Jean-Jacques Goldman shares his thoughts about life and its challenges and choices, students acquire information from the French perspective," she explains.

The Role of Technology

Naditz started teaching in 1993, a year before Marc Andreessen and Jim Clark introduced the Netscape Navigator browser and five years before the company Google was born.

"The Internet and more specifically, YouTube, changed the way I teach," she says. "These tools are not exclusive to language teachers, but for us it's a way to bring the French-speaking world to my students."

Gadbois did not really incorporate music into her classroom until the mid-1990s. Before the Internet, she says, it was more difficult to find authentic music. "I used a few artists that friends in the field tipped me off about," she recalls. "But gaining access to the music was a challenge."

It is easy today to forget about the logistical hurdles teachers used to face in getting their hands on authentic materials. "Maybe a friend would go overseas, or I'd make a trip to Montreal," says Gadbois. "You could order cassettes by mail, but it was a slow process." Teachers are now finding music videos, film clips, and even foreign language news to be powerful tools to supplement

their classroom instruction and create lasting connections for their students. Many of Zaraysky's tips, such as finding international news broadcasts on the Internet, would have been impossible even a few years ago for—as ubiquitous as it is today—YouTube was created just six years ago.

Several years ago, Gadbois began teaching Edith Piaf's 1961 song "Non, je ne regrette rien" (I regret nothing). To prepare, she leads her students through a writing exercise examining their personal regrets, and then regrets from the point of view of an older person, which also requires the students to employ different past tenses. To finish the unit, the class watches the last seven minutes of the 2007 movie *La Vie en Rose*, which ends with actor Marion Cotillard, playing Edith Piaf, performing the song.

"The students are hooked by her life story and that song really resonates with teenagers," says Gadbois. "Watching the film clip is a powerful way to tie it all together."

Teachers also find that students use technology outside of the classroom to continue exploring connections with music. "My students have begun bringing me French songs they find on iTunes, asking if we can use them in class," says Naditz. "If a song interests the students and reinforces a concept I want to teach, I'll consider incorporating it into a lesson plan."

Gadbois knew she had scored a home run with music when the quarterback of the Cathedral High School football team told her he downloaded "Non, je ne regrette rien" to his MP3 player the day after she introduced it in class. "At open house this year, a parent told me of his personal pride when his daughter began singing along with "Non, je ne regrette rien" while they were watching the movie *Inception*," she says.

Nineteenth century poet Henry Woodsworth Longfellow probably could never have envisioned YouTube, MP3 players, or the Internet when he embarked on a three-year journey across Europe in 1826. But on that journey, during which he acquired seven languages, he did capture the synergy between language and music that exists perhaps even more strongly today. In his meditative travelogue about those years, "Outre Mer: A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea," Longfellow wrote that "music is the universal language of mankind."

What's clear today is that music remains as relevant to mankind as ever even in the midst of a technological age—and that this universal language continues to connect many students to the rhythms of a foreign language and the vibrancy and uniqueness of a foreign culture.

Patricia Koning is a freelance writer and regular contributor to The Language Educator based in Livermore, California.

For More Information

Carole D. Fredericks Foundation
www.carolefredericksfoundation.org

DOPPEL-U
www.doppel-u.de/cms

Grammy in the Schools
www.grammyintheschools.com

Grammy Foundation
www.grammy.com/grammy_foundation

LaMa House Publishing
www.paramica.com

Louise Armstrong Center for Music and Learning
www.musicandmedicine.org

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