Music in Africa South of the Sahara

Music has an important role in African culture south of the Sahara. It often accompanies many rite-of-passage events such as births, adolescent coming-of-age ceremonies, marriages, and burials. It is used to preserve and pass along cultural history. Music helps organize and coordinate work activities such as hunting and clearing fields. It also has been used to rally Africans to demand greater political freedom. And of course, it is used for entertainment.

Musical Styles People who live south of the Sahara make many different kinds of music. The different musical styles share many characteristics, however. Music south of the Sahara often contains elements of repetition (repeating sounds, rhythms, or words), polyphony (the mixing together of several musical parts), and polyrhythm (the simultaneous sounding of two or more independent rhythms). Call-and-response forms are also common. In call and response, two musical voices—a solo singer (the “call”) and a group chorus (the “response”—swap lines back and forth, with the solo singer often improvising (making up words) as he or she sings.

Musical Instruments Musicians use a wide variety of instruments, but drums are especially common. They come in many different shapes and sizes and are often made of natural materials such as wood, gourds, clay, and animal skins. Other percussion instruments like clap sticks, bells, rattles, slit gongs, and xylophones are often used as well. Another important instrument is the mbira (also called a thumb piano, marimba, or karimba). This is a wooden board with metal strips attached. The strips are plucked with the thumbs or fingers. In addition to percussion instruments, wind and string instruments can be heard. Flutes are made from bamboo, reeds, wood, and even bones. Trumpets are made from animal horns, and clarinets are made from plant stems. Musical bows, lutes, lyres, and harps are common.

Directions: On a separate sheet of paper, answer the following questions.

1. Making Connections How do the instruments used in music south of the Sahara reflect the environment of the region?

2. Identifying Name three characteristics that are common to music south of the Sahara.
Teaching Strategies for Different Learning Styles

The following activities are ways the basic lesson can be modified to accommodate students’ different learning styles.

English Learners (EL)

Have students explain the difference between percussion, string, and wind instruments. Then have students categorize the instruments named in the article as percussion, string, or wind.

Verbal/Linguistic; Intrapersonal

African musical styles have had a major impact on American popular music. Ask students to investigate this topic and produce a three-page paper on their findings.

Kinesthetic

Have students make and demonstrate instruments used in traditional sub-Saharan music.

Auditory/Musical; Logical/Mathematical; Interpersonal

As you play recordings of several different styles of modern African music for the class, point out their various characteristics (e.g., polyphony, polyrhythm). Ask students which styles they enjoy the most and why, and create a ranking list on the board based on their responses. Then ask pairs of students to make Venn diagrams analyzing similarities and differences between sub-Saharan musical genres and popular American musical styles.

Visual/Spatial

After they have heard a variety of African music styles, have students create posters for an “all-star” concert featuring the one they liked best. Encourage students to capture the “feel” of the music in their posters.

Logical/Mathematical

Ask students to organize the information about sub-Saharan music using a spider chart like the one here.

Advanced Learners

Cultural appropriation is the adoption of some specific elements of one culture by a different cultural group. White, non-African musicians are sometimes accused of “stealing” African culture by using or adapting African musical styles in their own music. Ask students to explore this idea. How much do “borrowers” need to respect and understand the traditions they are using? Are originators being exploited by the borrowers? Students should summarize and comment on the topic in a three-page paper.

Kinesthetic

Invite students to use dance to interpret various types of sub-Saharan music.

Below Grade Level

A KWL chart taps student knowledge and generates student interest. Have students create a three-column chart titled Sub-Saharan Music. Explain that they will fill out the chart by writing what they Know about the topic in the first column, what they Want to know in the second, and what they Learned in the third. Have students first fill out the K and W columns. Then ask them to complete the L column as they read the information on the previous page or conduct their own library or Internet research.