

**Title:** It's Your 'Thang': Creating Your Own Musical Instrument

Integrating global music into classroom instruction provides a gateway to exploring and connecting across cultures. Music has always been a vital part of human expression. It has the power to engage, motivate and inspire students and builds bridges between both what is familiar and what is unfamiliar. The integration of music across the curriculum enables students to engage in rich textual analysis of diverse, interdisciplinary primary source materials, as well further develop global competency skills such as recognizing perspectives and communicating across cultures. This lesson integrates music from the album [Wu Fei and Abigail Washburn](#), available through Smithsonian Folkways.

**Lesson Theme:** Exploring culture through musical instruments

**Featured Songs:** "Four Seasons Medley: Four Seasons/Dark Ocean Waltz" and/or "Ping Tan Dance"

**Overview:** Students will learn the categories/families of instruments and be introduced to the banjo and the guzheng. They will see how instruments reflect a culture/region of the world, hear how combinations of instruments from around the world create new and interesting styles of music and witness the way music fosters cross-cultural relations.

**Suggested Grade level:** Community College

**Subject:** Music

**Corresponding National Standards:** N/A

**Corresponding Global Competency Skills:** [Asia Society Global Competency Skills](#) Investigate the World and Communicate Ideas, Take Action

**Essential Question(s)**

- How do instruments (including the voice) express emotions and the human condition?
- Why do we use instruments for expression?
- Why is music (oral or instrumental) such a powerful form of expression?
- How do the materials used for instruments reflect a culture or region of the world?

**Lesson Objectives:** Students will create an instrument that reflects some aspect of their culture.

**Materials:**

- Computer for access to the internet for Global Jukebox and YouTube.
- Students will provide their own materials to create their instruments.
- Cell phone or tape recorder to record group performance.
- Creativity, an open mind and heart, and a willingness to be vulnerable and have fun.

- [Lyrics to Four Seasons Medley](#)
- [Lyrics to Ping Tan Dance](#)

### Background information for the educator

- Students should create an account in Global Jukebox <https://theglobaljukebox.org/#>

### The Artists: Abigail Washburn (banjo) and Wu Fei (guzheng).

- This video, [The Ripple Effect: Two Cultures, One Voice](#), gives a brief overview of their friendship and musical collaboration.

**Abigail Washburn** is a clawhammer banjo player and singer who hails from the Midwest. She speaks Chinese fluently. Her original career plan was to become an international attorney. The TED Talk, [Building US-China Relations by Banjo](#), features Washburn talking about the unexpected change in her life plans:

- **Abigail Washburn's website:** [www.abigailwashburn.com](http://www.abigailwashburn.com).
- [Parts of the banjo](#)
- [Basics of the banjo with Abigail Washburn](#)

### Background on the banjo

- The banjo traces its roots to Africa. Black slaves constructed handmade banjos from animal skins stretched over hollowed-out gourds. The strings were made from guts with a makeshift bridge to support them. During colonial times, slaves danced to fiddle and banjo music during Christmas and Easter holiday celebrations. Here is a brief history of the black banjo by Rhiannon Giddens: [On the Lost History of the Black Banjo](#)
- The akonting is believed to be ancestor of the banjo. Here is an example of the [akonting](#)
- Whites in Appalachia made their own homemade banjos and created music to fit the range and timbre of the instrument. The banjo became better known and more popular through the minstrel show which was a popular, yet degrading, form of entertainment in the 19th and early 20th centuries where whites blacked up as African Americans. Minstrel shows featured comedy, songs, dances and skits to depict the white perception of black life on the plantations.
- During the early days of the minstrel show, a man named John Sweeney added a shorter, fifth string to the banjo and developed a more complex style of playing. The best-known practitioner and innovator of the banjo in recent history is Earl Scruggs. He devised techniques of playing that allowed the banjo to bend notes and meet the standards to be an integral part of a bluegrass ensemble.

### [Background on Appalachian Traditional Music](#)

#### [Map of Appalachia](#)

**Wu Fei** plays the guzheng (goo-ZHANG), an instrument native to China. Connect to her website: [www.wufeimusic.com](http://www.wufeimusic.com).

### [Background on the guzheng:](#)

- It is a portable instrument played by men and women.
- Various models of the guzheng have 5, 12, 16 or 21 strings.
  - In the old days, strings were made of silk. Now they are made of steel wrapped in nylon.

- The bending of notes imitates the voice and lets the performer create half steps.
- The guzheng is based on the G pentatonic (five pitches) scale. The five pitches represent the five classes in ancient China. Performers change keys by moving the bridge.
- Fingers are taped so sound is even between the hands. Some performers wear plectrums on their fingers.
- Confucius said that music is a metaphor for social harmony and stressed the importance of music and etiquette.

**Background Information on the songs:** “Four Seasons Medley: Four Seasons/Dark Ocean Waltz” and “Ping Tan Dance”

“**Four Seasons Medley: Four Seasons/Dark Ocean Waltz**” is a love song about the women in the Qinghai province in central western China who aggressively pursue any man who catches their eye. These bold, loving women go after the man they want. The flowers in the story are an expression of their love.

Informational videos on Qinghai province:

- [The China Project: Qinghai Province](#)
- [Things to Do in Qinghai, China](#)
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Here is the Chinese text of [Four Seasons Medley](#), translated into English.

[Four Seasons, Abigail Washburn and Wu Fei](#) (video)

“**Ping Tan Dance**” was composed by Wu Fei to vent her frustrations about her friends. After they left high school and entered college, Wu Fei noticed how her friends’ personalities changed....and not for the better. The story is told from the perspective of a grandmother who is looking at the young people of today and wondering, “What is the world coming to!” Wu Fei composed this piece while in college as an exercise for her composition class.

A special feature of this song is the flatfooting (clogging) performed by Abigail. According to Abigail, flatfooting is an Appalachian dance that precedes tap dance has influences from the British Isles, Africa and Native Americans. Here’s a video of a [flatfooting demonstration](#).

### Music analysis strategies

- Recognize the similarities and differences between the guzheng and the banjo. Listen for the unique timbre of each instrument.
- To what category (or family) of instruments do they belong?
- How do the instruments, clothing and tonal production (vocal quality) reflect the respective cultures of the artists?

### Discussion questions (can be used for one or both songs)

- What are your initial impressions or thoughts or observations about the song(s)?
- What aspects of bluegrass and/or Chinese music do you hear in these songs?
- How are you able to hear the difference between the banjo and the guzheng?
- How does the intro set the mood for *Four Seasons*?

### Specific student activities:

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### **Preliminary activity: 15-20 minutes of a class session, research; 20 minutes to cover regions**

- As a class, review the families of instruments used in Western music (string, brass, woodwind, percussion, keyboard and electronic) and examples of instruments within each of these families. (This could be skipped and covered under the next bullet.)
- Then go over the broader categories that cover instruments from around the world:
  - aerophones (operate via column of air),
  - chordophones (string instruments, produce more than 1 pitch),
  - membranophones (stretched skins that vibrate),
  - idiophones (made of solid materials that produce sound when shaken, rattled, rubbed, etc.), and
  - electrophones (produce sound electronically).
  - Some textbooks may include corpophones which refer to using parts of the body (snapping fingers, beating the chest, etc.).
- Break students into small groups and assign each group a region of the world. Using their phones or Global Jukebox, have students find indigenous instruments from their assigned region that belong to each category.
  - Students could do a bit of research to see what the instruments are made of or their origins.
- Have each group orally share instruments that belong to each category and allow them access the classroom computer to share one instrument they found particularly fascinating with the class.

### **Discussion questions:**

- Did each region of the world have instruments from all categories? Did one category of instruments predominate?
- What materials were the instruments made of? Where the materials unique to that region?
- Did any of the instruments have a unique design, decoration, shape, etc.? If so, did that represent some aspect of the culture or of the people who created it?

### **Activity 1: It's Your Thang: Creating Your Own Musical Instrument (Time: 1 week, outside of class)**

- Ideally students should work alone on this project, but if two people have a great idea, let them go for it.
- The instruments should be 'home made' with common objects or materials they can easily access.
- The instrument should be portable so they can bring it to class.
- The instrument must produce sound.
- The student(s) should name the instrument. The name of the instrument may reflect the family/category it belongs to, the sound it produces or how the sound is produced or be named after the inventor(s).
- The instruments should NOT be a replica of existing instruments; however, they can use parts of an existing instrument. (Note: rubber bands do not make good replacement for strings.)
- This is a fun activity where students are only limited by their creativity.
- If students need some ideas for instruments, show them this video! [The Most Unusual Musical Instruments of the World](#)

Students should present their instruments to the class and

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- explain the materials used, what the instrument is called, what category it belongs to, and demonstrate how it produces sound.
- explain how the instrument reflects their larger culture (country/region) or specific culture (region/ethnicity, race).
- perform it along with “Four Seasons Medley” or “Ping Tan Dance”.

If necessary, instructor should initiate applause after each presentation, so students feel valued. Allow time for class to ask questions about the instruments. Consider having students vote for best instrument, most creative and offering small reward as prizes (extra bonus points, etc.).

### Additional Student Activities

#### Suggestion 1: [What does an ethnomusicologist do?](#)

- In addition to music, what other fields do ethnomusicologists have a strong interest in?
- Why is fieldwork an important aspect of an ethnomusicologist’s study?
- Should an ethnomusicologist in the field should try to influence the music of the culture they are studying? Why or why not?

#### Suggestion 2: Explore “Rock” Music: [Mysterious Stones May Have Been Ancient Musical Instruments](#)

- What category of instruments do these resonating rocks belong to?
- Where are they found in the world?
- What did ancient people use them for?

**Suggestion 3:** Check out this video by jazz violinist, Regina Carter. The CD features African folk tunes performed by a unique instrumental ensemble. “[Artistya](#)” is a tune from her CD, Reverse Thread.

- What images come to mind as you listen to the music?
- Identify the categories of instruments heard/seen in the video.
- How might a record company promote this music? Is it pop? Jazz? World Music?

### Assessments for the student learning activities

- Test students’ knowledge over the categories of instruments. Show them pictures or video clips of various instruments from around the world and ask them which category the instruments belong to.
- For their instrument project: did students follow the instructions? Did the instrument in some way reflect their culture? Were they able to perform the instrument with one of the songs on the album?
- Short answer question for a test. A Hollywood producer is shooting a film set in Zimbabwe. How might an ethnomusicologist be helpful for that production? (Instructors may use any foreign country of their choice.)
- Short answer question for a test. Have students reflect on the project and the creative process. Did they start with a category or did the materials at hand influence the type of instrument they made?

### Learning Extensions

- Students with a music background may create a composition featuring their instrument.
- Depending on the nature of their instrument, allow students to perform it with one of the songs on the CD.
- Offer students extra credit for attending a live music performance that features instruments from

another culture or Western instruments performed in non-traditional ways.

- They should write a short reaction paper describing the instrument, the family it belongs to and its function within the performance.
- Find a piece of music from another country. Play it every day for a month during class and have the students write a short paragraph on their perceptions about the music. Do not tell them anything about the music or artists. At the end of 30 days, have students observe if their opinions/thoughts about the music changed. If they found the music strident or dissonant at first, did they feel that way after 30 days? In short, did their perception of the music change with continuous exposure to the piece?
- Have students list CDs/songs that exemplify cross-cultural collaboration or name musicians who perform in a variety of genres.
- Watch 3-10 minutes of this performance of [Butterfly Lovers Concerto](#) (or entire concerto)
  - In class or as part of a test, have student list at least three similarities and three differences between this orchestra and a typical Western orchestra. (Students are not expected to know the Chinese instruments, but they should be familiar with the Western orchestra to make comparisons.)
    - Example responses for similarities--cello and bass, instruments arranged in sections, conductor, music stands, formal dress, percussion at the rear, timpani, strings largest section, soloist seated in front, etc.
    - Example responses for differences—flutes made of wood, no brass section (trumpets, French horns), no violins or violas, different types of string instruments, men and women wear different colors, etc. (Do not use age of performers. This appears to be a youth orchestra.)
- Consider inviting a luthier or professional instrument maker to demonstrate their craft to the class.

#### Explore Further:

- Check out the music of Pamela Z at [www.pamelaz.com](http://www.pamelaz.com) She is a composer/performer and media artist who works with voice, live electronic processing, sampled sound and video. A pioneer of live digital looping technique, she processes her voice in real time to create dense, complex sonic layers.
- Watch and discuss Wu Fei performing her original composition, "[If I Was A Batman Queen](#)" for guzheng and chamber ensemble.
  - What are some clues that this is a concert?
  - Is this a performance of classical music? Have students defend their answer either way.
  - What is that opening section of music called? (Cadenza) Do you think it's notated or improvised?
  - Why doesn't the conductor conduct at the beginning of the piece?
- Watch and discuss [this video](#) of Abigail Washburn performing traditional roots music from the USA with a Uygur orchestra in China.
  - How do these musicians from diverse cultures make music together?
  - This is a jam session. Have students define a jam session. How is this performance different from Wu Fei's in the previous video?
- Let students bring instruments to class (or use the ones they made!) and have a jam session. Some students may wish to sing, dance, or clap. Allow the students to take charge in terms of selection of songs, key, tempo, etc. (Tunes could be selected in advance and sheet music provided in different keys.) Make it a celebration and have students bring food.
- Visit the Earl Scruggs Center, Shelby, N. C.

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