

Title: Using “Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song” to Explore Lullabies

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: Lullabies

Featured Song: “Water Is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song”

Overview: In this lesson, students will explore the reasons people sing, discuss lullabies and the function they serve in cultures around the world, and listen to “Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song” to illustrate how two lullabies from different countries can be combined into one song. Students will examine the texts and listen to a variety of lullabies from different cultures, identify their shared characteristics, and apply this knowledge by altering the lyrics and performance style of a contemporary pop song to turn it into a lullaby.

Suggested Grade levels: 6-8

Subjects: General Music, Choir

Corresponding National Standards:

- NAFME PK–8 General Music Standards: MU:Cr2.1.6a/7a/8a, MU:Cr3.1.6a/7a/8a, MU:Pr4.3.6a/7a/8a, MU:Re7.1.6a/7a/8a, MU:Re7.2.6b/7b/8b
- NAFME Ensemble Music Standards: MU:Cr1.1.E.5a, MU:Pr4.3.E.5a, MU:Pr6.1.E.5b, MU:Re8.1.E.5a

Corresponding Global Competency Skills: (from Global Competence Matrix for the Arts)

- Investigate the World: Students investigate the world beyond their immediate environment.
- Recognize Perspectives: Students use the arts to recognize their own and others’ perspectives.

Essential Questions:

- Why do people sing?
- What function do lullabies serve in our culture?
- Do cultures outside of your own use lullabies?
- What musical attributes do lullabies from all cultures share?
- How does one perform a lullaby in a way that fits its purpose?

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will be able to articulate several reasons that people sing.
- Students will understand the functions of lullabies as songs used to calm young children and babies across cultures.
- Students will be able to articulate shared musical attributes of lullabies from different cultures.
- Students will demonstrate the attributes discussed by singing, playing, and/or arranging a known or newly learned lullaby.

Materials:

- [Water is Wide-Wusuli Boat Song Comparison PDF](#)
- [“Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song official lyrics](#)
- [Lyrics for Additional Lullabies PDF](#)
- [We Will Rock You Lyrics PDF](#)
- Audio/visual equipment to play music from YouTube
- [Smithsonian Folkways examples of lullabies](#)

Background Information for the Educator:

Introduction to “Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song”

In “Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song,” Abigail Washburn and Wu Fei combine two folk songs, one from each of their cultures, to create a lullaby. As these two musicians and friends discussed which songs from their own cultures they sang to their children to help them fall asleep, these two pieces emerged as songs that could be woven together. Abigail Washburn plays the banjo and Wu Fei plays the traditional Chinese guzheng.

“The Water is Wide” is known as an American folk song and became widely known after Pete Seeger introduced it on his 1958 album *America’s Favorite Ballads, Vol. 2*. Many artists have covered the song since that time, including Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, James Taylor, Eva Cassidy, and Mark Knopfler. While it is commonly referred to as an American folk song, it was actually published in a book of folk songs collected in Somerset, England by Cecil Sharp and published in 1906. Sharp noted the song’s lyrics were similar to the Scottish ballad “Waly, Waly” and published it under this name. This is likely why “The Water is Wide” is often thought to be of Scottish origin.

The song is about lovers separated by a figurative or real river, with the last line of the song reading “and both shall row, my love and I.” Abigail Washburn sang this song as a lullaby to her children and altered the last line to read, “And we shall row, my child and I.”

(For a very thorough examination of the history of “The Water is Wide,” read [The Water is Wide: The History of a Folksong.](#))

“Wusuli Boat Song” is a traditional Chinese lullaby. It originated with the Hezhe people, one of the smallest ethnic minority groups in China. Despite their small population, this folk song is very popular in China. The Hezhe are nomadic river and boat people who rely on fishing and hunting along the Heilong, Songhua, and Wusuli rivers in northeast China.

(For more information about the Hezhe, read this article about the [Hezhe ethnic minority](#).)

For information about the artists:

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- Abigail Washburn’s website: <http://abigailwashburn.com/>
- Wu Fei’s website: <http://www.wufeimusic.com/>

For information about the instruments used in the recording:

- Washburn discusses the banjo: [Banjo Basics with Abigail Washburn](#)
- Wu Fei introduces the guzheng: [Guzheng Showcase with Wu Fei](#)

For information about lullabies:

- Information on the historical relevance of lullabies: [The Universal Language of Lullabies](#)
- Documentary on lullabies (25 min.), focusing on lullabies around the world, and their importance in child development: [The Language of Lullabies](#)
- Article on the mystery of lullabies and The Lullaby Project through Carnegie Hall: [The Melancholy Mystery of Lullabies](#)

Lesson Plan/Student Learning Activities (40 minutes)

Activity 1 (5 minutes)

- Discussion question: Why Do People Sing?
- Ask students to brainstorm their answers to the above question. Possibly write answers on a white board.
- If students have not mentioned “to calm children,” “to lull babies to sleep,” or something similar, ask leading questions to arrive at this answer. (E.g., “Have you ever noticed grown-ups singing to babies? What are some possible reasons they do that?”)
- If students have not used the term lullaby, introduce it now, mention that parents have been singing lullabies in cultures around the world to their babies for thousands of years, and pose the following questions:
 - What are all the reasons you can think of that people sing lullabies? (Possible answers include to help a baby fall asleep, to calm a child, to show love, to demonstrate caring, to stop a baby from crying, etc.)
 - Do you know any lullabies? What are they?

Activity 2 (8–10 minutes)

- Tell students they are going to listen to a lullaby that combines traditional songs and instruments from two different countries, America and China.
- Depending on the length of your class, include as much or as little information as you wish about the performers and their instruments using the background information above.
- Ask students to listen and write down their thoughts on the following questions as they listen: How does this music make me feel? How are the two songs different (music and lyrics)? How are the two songs similar (music and lyrics)? Use the document ([Water Is Wide-Wusuli Boat Song Comparisons PDF](#)) as a template for students to fill out on paper or digitally.
- Play audio or [video](#) recording of “Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song.”
- Ask students to share their observations.

Assessment: Handout/discussion: Were students able to identify differences and similarities between the two folk songs?

Activity 3 (8–10 minutes)

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- Distribute the [Lyrics to Additional Lullabies PDF](#) to students. Ask them to look over the text of each song and spend a couple of minutes circling words or themes that they see as characteristic of lullabies.
- Follow this examination of the text by listening to short clips of some or all of the lullabies listed on the lyrics sheet. It is only necessary to play about 30 seconds of each song for students to identify musical characteristics. Have students write down shared characteristics they notice in the music on their paper and then discuss what they heard. Examples may include:

Simple melody and rhythm

Repetitive melody

Soft dynamics

Peaceful, lilting, gentle

Note values are longer

Frequently in a major key

Slow or moderate tempo

Monophonic in texture (when sung to babies, although often homophonic on recordings)

Simple time signatures (4/4, 3/4, or 6/8)

Basic harmonic structure (primarily tonic and dominant chords)

Video links to lullabies:

[“Thula Baba”](#) (South African)

[“Ho, Ho, Watanay”](#) (Iroquois)

[“Fais Dodo”](#) (French)

[“Rock-a-bye Baby”](#) (England/United States)

[“All the Pretty Little Horses”](#) (Southern United States)

Summative Assessment: Written comments/discussion. Were students able to identify common characteristics of lullabies from different parts of the world?

Activity 4 (15–20 minutes)

- Choose an upbeat, popular song that most students will know. Suggested song: “We Will Rock You” by Queen. Print the [lyrics sheet](#) or project the lyrics on a screen for students to view. As a class (or in smaller groups, depending on the size of your class), work together to change the lyrics and some of the elements of music (dynamics, tempo, texture, rhythm, etc.) to turn the song into a lullaby, utilizing the characteristics students have identified during this lesson.

Assessment: Did students apply their knowledge to create a lullaby version of a well-known song that was not originally a lullaby? If using this project as a formative assessment, consider a four-point rubric: two for applying two musical characteristics of lullabies to their arrangement (e.g., changing the tempo, dynamics), and two for applying two characteristics of text in lullabies to the new arrangement.

Learning Extensions:

- Interview a family member about what lullabies they remember as a child and what lullabies they sang to their children.

- Be an ethnomusicologist for a day: make a field recording of a lullaby that a friend or family member is willing to sing.
- “Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song” is a partner song. Learn other partner songs (classroom or choral settings).
- Compose a short lullaby.
- Choose a lullaby and research its history.

Materials:

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Bibliography

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