

by Randall Everett Allsup

# Popular Music and Classical Musicians

## Strategies and Perspectives

**Abstract:** In recent years, popular music has become a growing area of music study and is increasingly accepted in schools and universities around the world. Despite this general enthusiasm, classically trained music teachers bring a certain hesitation to this art form, perhaps because too few have had formal hands-on experience with it. This article describes several strategies for teaching the study and practice of popular music to classically trained musicians as part of a university teacher education program. Included is discussion of collaborative learning, an approach that helps classical musicians learn popular music through participating in “classroom garage bands.”

**Keywords:** learning styles, multicultural music, popular music, rock, teacher education, teaching issues

*How can you teach popular music to students who have spent years in the classical realm? Here are some ideas to help you get started.*

In recent years, popular music has emerged as a dynamic domain of music study and is finding an increasingly comfortable place in schools and universities around the world. Countries like Finland and Sweden have prepared generations of popular music educators, and the United Kingdom is currently experimenting with a large-scale middle and high school curriculum around popular music and aural learning.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, parents and principals are becoming more supportive than ever of teachers who teach popular music, to say nothing of the children who are clamoring to get into such classes. Publications from MENC: The National Association for Music Education and other organizations suggest that those who create curricula are looking at ways to sensibly integrate this subject into the schools.<sup>2</sup> In spite of this general enthusiasm, classically trained music teachers often bring a certain hesitation to this art form, perhaps because too few have had formal hands-on experience with it.

At Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City, I introduced the study and practice of popular music to classically trained musicians as part of a teacher education program. This article describes a pedagogy of collaborative learning, an approach that helps classical musicians learn popular music through participating in what I call “classroom garage bands.” This method, however, is not about moving students and teachers *away* from Western classical art music. Rather, my work with popular music and the mostly classically trained students with whom I collaborate is part of a larger goal to diversify and vitalize music education in public schools. Popular music can point the way to new ways of teaching and learning music of any kind.

### The Classroom Garage Band

Educational research has consistently extolled the virtues of collaborative work and its effect

on how students learn and retain information. And music educators have long known that small-group learning, what we call chamber music, is an ideal venue for practicing independent, creative, and critical thinking.<sup>3</sup> What popular musicians do in garage bands is more or less a “natural” combination of sound educational practices, like creative music making and group problem solving, only minus a coach or teacher. I hope to demonstrate that working in a “modified” garage band, with the teacher acting as facilitator and guide, is not an unfamiliar practice at all, but one that can give classical musicians access to important *new* experiences, like learning new musical styles and composing as a group. It goes without saying that musicians who have positive experiences engaging in diverse styles of music and multiple ways of learning will be best equipped to facilitate similar experiences in the schools where they teach.

So, what exactly are classroom garage bands? What do they do, and how are they organized? I introduced “garage band learning” in my college’s secondary music methods course, which is required for students seeking state certification to teach in schools in and around New York City. At the beginning of the course, I divide the class into groups of five, looking specifically to achieve balanced diversity within ensembles. Does each garage band have a singer? A drummer? A piano player? An instrumentalist? Are groups balanced according to gender, age, jazz or popular-music experience, or national/international status? The ensembles stay together for the length of one semester. Members compose and rehearse outside of class for two hours once a week. Students are strongly encouraged to experiment with new instruments, and while they are not required to perform on popular instruments, many of them do.

The garage bands are given specific musical challenges to consider and complete, and they perform what they have achieved in class the following week. A sample of these strategies and the questions they raise is outlined below. All performances are recorded and played back for critical discussion. On evenings when no compositions are due (we may

debate a reading or discuss the garage band experience and its possibilities in schools), the bands still meet but are free to make revisions or compose something new. The semester ends, naturally, with a concert of the students’ newly composed music.

Certainly, there are many other ways to configure a classroom garage band, such as allowing students to select the friends they wish to play with.<sup>4</sup> But a critical educational aim is to have students experience and think deeply about democratic music education. In research I conducted some years ago, I saw a link between popular-music making and classroom democracy.<sup>5</sup> What kids do in garage bands can serve as a model for nonhierarchical music education. As a kind of teacher preparation in democracy, classroom garage bands must work across differences and conflicts, learning from the talents and shortcomings of those who make up one’s group, teaching what one does well to others, sharing leadership and followership, and composing music that reflects the makeup of one’s group. Although difficulties are inherent in this approach, students emerge with practical experience in handling issues of musical and cultural diversity.

What follows are four strategies that connect classical music to popular music in ways that are provocative and open-ended. Each description reveals some of the unique problems and promises that have attended my work with this class.

## Building Two-Way Bridges

One common misconception that classical musicians bring to the study of popular music is that the two art forms exist across a seemingly vast, unbridgeable gulf. That this appears true is a result, arguably, from a lack of practical exposure. In undergraduate history and theory courses, music majors are seldom confronted with opportunities to bring serious theoretical thought to works of, for example, Pink Floyd or The Police. Although this sounds facetious, the point is in fact quite serious. Can popular music hold up to intense inspection and analysis by classical musicians? What can

be learned from a cross-historical, cross-genre comparison of two seemingly disparate works?

To create such an encounter, I start the semester with an aural analysis of “Dido’s Lament” from Henry Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas*. After listening to the aria, we locate its place in music history and identify its musical characteristics. Singers who have performed the aria may talk about Dido’s character and about how they approach the study of baroque opera. Our analysis is orderly, giving particular attention to the passacaglia that underpins and unifies the work. We discuss Purcell’s use of patterned descending minor seconds and the manner in which this compositional technique heightens Dido’s tragedy.

Next, another lament is played that uses the same passacaglia in the same key: Led Zeppelin’s “Dazed and Confused.” The musical comparison is shocking: so different and so uncannily similar. But we are soon confronted by a question: Can we use the same rules of aural analysis? *Should* we use the same rules and procedures? Quickly the class realizes that a “detached” analysis is impossible. Strong feelings of like and dislike are provoked, leading some students to claim cultural “ownership” of “Dazed and Confused,” while others disavow it. The confusion produces a lively discussion in which assumptions and misconceptions about popular music and its place in the classroom are discussed. When the evening class ends, I give my students their garage band assignment: “Create your own lament that uses a passacaglia as its unifying device.”

This strategy is an interesting role reversal for classical musicians in that it uses classical music as a bridge to popular music and not the other way around. Bridges are important metaphors when educators think about expanding understandings. But conceptual bridges must move two ways, not one. A common strategy associated with the teaching of popular music is that it is a useful way to help young students create a bridge to classical music. Students can be tricked into liking classical music, the story goes, if you just work backward, starting with what

students know and like and ending with what the teacher knows and likes. The assumption lying barely hidden beneath this approach is that classical music is somehow more valuable than popular music, that popular music is unworthy of study in its own right, and that by some difficult and roundabout journey, students can learn to appreciate, through exposure, a finer, “elevated” experience—like learning to enjoy oysters or fish eggs. In this context, it is important to make a distinction between the manipulation of students’ interests (building a one-way bridge) and the democratic goal of making connections between disparate art forms (building a two-way bridge).

### Minimalist/Hybrid Styles

Songwriting can be complicated because classical and popular musicians tend to hear, see, and conceptualize harmonic motion differently. Approaching this compositional task from a position of strength rather than perceived deficit means, once again, starting with the familiar. In the following strategy, I have been able to facilitate songwriting without explicit instruction in chordal theory by linking the works of minimalist composers with popular musicians who do the same. Starting with some examples of music from Philip Glass’s “Satyagraha,” we listen to and list the characteristics of minimalist music. Then, together in class, we improvise our own version of “Satyagraha,” using the same easily recognizable harmonic sequence on which Glass builds his undulating layers of sound and melody.

Next, I introduce popular artists who borrow minimalist musical vocabulary, or those whose works appear minimalist to a classical musician’s ear, such as Yann Tiersen’s “La Valse d’Amélie” from the movie *Amélie* or the work of contemporary singer-songwriter Sufjan Stevens.<sup>6</sup> The garage band assignment asks each group to write a song using words and melody that reflect minimalism in one or more of its myriad forms. When the bands perform the following week, it is fascinating to hear the divergent ways in which each group approached the assignment. While most compositions appear

to be a kind of hybrid between popular and classical music—a hybrid style, incidentally, that is not out of character with contemporary pop aesthetics—the intent of this project is not to “make” popular musicians out of classical musicians, but to introduce students to new ways of learning, composing, and interacting musically. Borrowing from musical styles and genres, furthermore, provokes fascinating discussions about the meaning of multiculturalism, cultural ownership, and when, whether, and how to respect traditions outside the Western classical art paradigm.

### Creating New Contexts

Popular music shares with classical music the misfortune that certain songs are so overplayed, whether through commercial use or as background sound in shopping malls, that we can no longer hear them in new or interesting ways.<sup>7</sup> John Lennon’s “Imagine” is one such example, a song rich in educational possibilities but somewhat resistant to close examination. I begin study of this piece by vamping on its first two chords, C-major 7th and F-major 7th, in a moderate tempo, without telling students where the chords come from. We begin to improvise over this set, making up melodies and tunes, using the tones from the white keys on the piano. When our ideas are depleted, and our ears are crying out for another chord or two, I play Lennon’s “Imagine.” Hearing the piece after the work we just did brings new life to the song. Respect for how Lennon used “two simple chords” is readily apparent.<sup>8</sup>

By making the familiar unfamiliar, Lennon’s poetry stands out in stark relief: “You may say I’m a dreamer / But I’m not the only one / I hope someday you will join us / And the world will live as one.” The class discussion shifts away from music (or has it?) toward the strong emotional memories attached to this song, as well as to the problems of the world, of politics and social justice. The classroom space becomes electrically charged: intimate, angry, revelatory, even radical.

When popular music finds itself in a formal educational setting, its engagement

requires that teachers and students connect and deepen its cultural, emotional, and musical references. The so-called elements of music (e.g., intervallic relationships, tonal centers, melodic contours, forms, and phrases) are only different aspects of a larger cultural encounter. The value of any musical work is amplified when we connect its musical structure to the historical context in which it was created and the contemporary context in which it is being re-created. I realize that discussions about music that include more than its structural components can make a music teacher feel suddenly unsafe and unmoored. But the lack of safety is not the same as danger. Predictability, in music and in teaching, is rarely a place of deep insight.

Critical musicianship, the ability to think and act autonomously, can be best developed in settings where the unpredictable and unfamiliar are uncovered with others. There are many aspects of popular music that demand interrogation, but retreating to the safety of “the elements of music” without connecting said elements to larger issues—gender representation, violence, commercialism, and the like—can possibly reinscribe the very issues that need discussing the most. The teacher in this setting is vitally important, not only facilitating contact with new thoughts and ideas but also carefully moderating and circumscribing the limits of the dialogue. Discussions about popular music in a graduate seminar will look different from discussions in a high school music class. Even a familiar song like “Imagine” will need different starting and stopping points depending on a classroom’s location and context. Popular music confronts us with contemporary problems, and it is our job to help students sort through its conflicting messages. Setting sensible limits is not an act of censorship, but a way of protecting the diverse values and interests of everyone involved.<sup>9</sup>

### Resisting the High/Low Dichotomy

Classical musicians have spent much of their lifetime fine-tuning skills in an

artistic domain that is limitless in its complexity and challenge. Music majors who are used to playing Charles Ives and Shostakovich can be forgiven, I suppose, for bringing some degree of condescension to the music of Wayne Newton or Radiohead. And it stands to reason that anyone who has invested a great deal of time and energy into a lifelong artistic pursuit will be passionate about his or her chosen field. But arguments about the degree to which classical music is better, more complex, or more elevated than popular music are debates I am not interested in engaging in. What is the educational value of arguing one's preference, or arguing against the preferences of others? For the purposes of education, the location of "value" is found in experience.<sup>10</sup> And helping students have growing and positive experiences with all manner of music is one of the most important goals of music education.

If classical musicians, skeptical or otherwise, are to truly value and appreciate popular music, they must have positive experiences of their own with this art form. One strategy that gives students control over the quality of their own experience is to ask them to arrange a popular song for the very talents and abilities of their particular garage band. But before doing that, our class will listen to artists who looked outside their immediate circle for inspiration—curious musicians like John Coltrane, who reimagined "Some Day My Prince Will Come," or inventive ones like Cassandra Wilson, who recently remade Cyndi Lauper's "Time after Time" and Glen Campbell's "Wichita Lineman." In the eight years I have taught this course, no garage band has failed to find a popular song that excited and challenged them.

Popular-music arranging, as distinct from aural copying or making exact-sounding covers, is an artistic pursuit that crosses many musical domains and is an excellent skill for musicians and music educators to have experience with.<sup>11</sup> Arrangers must be creative problem solvers; they must do research. They must take ownership of their task, and there is never one right answer. After the garage bands perform their arrangements, it is

exciting to hear how they arrived at their choices. What drew each band to the song they chose? How did their arrangement speak to their identity as an ensemble, and as individuals across the group? Did their arrangement somehow change the meaning of the original tune? Discussions about means and ends, about meanings and aims, go a long way toward disabusing classical musicians of the myth that popular music is not as challenging or complex as classical music.

## The Teacher's Role

It may be some time before mainstream North American universities systematically graduate popular-music majors, or certify popular musicians with the credentials to teach in public schools. In the meantime, more and more classically trained musicians will be called on, or will take up the call themselves, to teach popular music in and after school. Today's generation of music educators must somehow fill in this gap, as the demand for popular-music education is increasing exponentially. What is the role of the music teacher in this context? What does the average classically trained music educator do? What are his or her roles? What are his or her priorities?

To answer these questions, it is important to reflect on the fact that classical musicians have never had much experience in educational scenarios that fall outside the master/apprentice model. As young musicians, we probably studied privately, auditioned into a school of music, and continued our apprenticeships with great masters there. Finally, existing with a certificate to teach, we became the new masters, inducting our students into the traditions we ourselves were trained in. The challenge we face in bringing popular music into the schools is the challenge of rethinking the fundamentals of traditional music education. It may be that the problem of popular music is actually an opportunity, a chance to test out a new way of teaching and learning music.

Without a master/apprentice model to fall back on, there is another way to teach popular music in the schools, and that is democratically. This means that teachers

must act as guides and facilitators rather than masters and autocrats: they must acknowledge the expertise that their students bring with them to school. In this vision, democratic music teachers will share what they know with their students without falling back on the habits of narrow or routine expertise. Indeed, classes may end up looking a lot like modified classroom garage bands. In contrast to the master/apprentice model, one can imagine a scenario in which students come to the teacher for help mostly when they need it, or one in which the teacher seeks out help from an expert student. The music teacher, of course, does not just disappear. I often remind my students that this is the hardest way to teach. In the strategies outlined above, the teacher-facilitator takes an active role in setting up musical challenges, moderating discussions, and posing questions that require critical thought.

Problems attend this approach, including no small amount of self-doubt. As a classically trained musician myself, I am without recourse to experience in my own garage band. Sociologists, furthermore, may be quick to point out that classroom garage bands do not resemble "real" garage bands very much at all, nor are the musical experiments invented by classically trained students "real" popular music. These are good questions to ask, but they are questions of cultural authority and identity, not education. I strongly believe that the pedagogical approach presented in this article would benefit all musicians and music teachers—classical, popular, or otherwise—as well as their students. The garage band model as a pedagogical approach is larger than the musical style on which it is based, and certainly larger than debates over what is or what is not popular music. It would be a failure of imagination were we to bring popular music into schools and universities using the same master/apprentice model of old.

## A Democratic Approach

As our profession works toward a conception of popular-music education, we must concede that there is a difference

between simply having popular music in the schools and educating through and with popular music. Teachers must begin to take an active role in shaping what an educational encounter with popular music looks like. A garage band approach has the advantage of circulating knowledge and skill. But more important, this method offers a democratic vision of interacting musically with the students we teach. Classical musicians can and should take part in leading this endeavor.

## NOTES

1. For information about the United Kingdom's Musical Futures Project and its popular music curriculum, visit [www.musicalfutures.org.uk/](http://www.musicalfutures.org.uk/).
2. See Carlos Rodriguez, *Bridging the Gap: Popular Music and Music Education* (Reston, VA: MENC, 2004); and Lucy Green, *Music, Informal Learning and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2008).
3. See Charles Villarubia, "Chamber Music: Skills and Teamwork," *Teaching Music* 7, no. 6 (2000): 34–42; and Luan Ford and Jane Davidson, "An Investigation of Members' Roles in Wind Quintets," *Psychology of Music* 31, no. 1 (2003): 53–74.
4. See Randall Everett Allsup's "Crossing Over: Mutual Learning and Democratic Action in Instrumental Music Education," PhD diss., Teachers College, Columbia University, 2002.
5. When working with popular music in classrooms, Lucy Green argues for "friendship groups" whereby children pick the friends they wish to perform with. See Green, *Music, Informal Learning and the School*.
6. Other popular music minimalists include Adem, Phish, DeVotchKa, and numerous hip-hop and techno artists.
7. "When an art product once attains classical status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience," wrote John Dewey. See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1934), 3. The task for teachers, he advises, is to restore continuity between the art form and everyday life.
8. Like John Lennon's "Imagine," Henryk Górecki's Symphony no. 4 is a great example of what a classical musician can do with two or three simple chords.
9. The garage band assignment was to compose a piece that uses but is not limited to C-major 7th and F-major 7th chords.
10. See John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1938; New York: Free Press, 1997).
11. See Standard 4, "Composing and arranging music within specific guidelines" from *National Standards for Arts Education* (Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference, 1994).