



CMP Teaching Plan

ELEMENTARY GENERAL

SAKURA



さくら
Sakura

さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら
さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら
さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら
さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら さくら

ANALYSIS

Broad Description

Traditional Japanese Folksong

Background

While Sakura is not an ancient Japanese folksong, the reverence and traditional ceremonies associated with the Sakura (Cherry Blossom) flower date back as early as the 8th or 9th centuries. It is impossible for me to overstate the importance and prevalence of this flower in Japanese culture. The tree intentionally decorates schools and public buildings, dictates the beginning of the new school and fiscal years, commands it's own Cherry Blossom Association that lists top blossom areas in every prefecture in the country and is rich with over a millennium of symbolism. The flowers presence in art, song, poetry, meditations, fashion, architecture and nationalism is a central defining symbol of Japanese aesthetic and culture.

The flower has long been a symbol for clouds, as they bloom en masse like a bundle of fluffy clouds, as well as a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of life. The fact that they are strikingly beautiful and fragrant, but last for only a short time adds to their rich symbolism. Their use in Buddhist teachings date back to the 1700's.

The song, Sakura, was probably written in the early 19th century and has been popular since about 1868, when it was included in a book for beginning koto players. Since the Meiji period in Japan, it has only increased in prevalence and popularity. It is included in multiple collections of most beloved Japanese folksongs, is sung at many international gatherings as a sing to represent Japan and is even used as "guiding music" in many electronic traffic crossing lights!

The song has been transcribed and arranged for many instrumental ensembles, including a very poplar rendition for Marimba ensemble. It is quoted in art music, including Reed's 5th Symphony and Puccini's Madame Butterfly. It has filtered into Western popular cuture—including Bon Jovi, Led Zeppelin, Cat Stevens and many other artists.

If there were a top ten list for most recognized folk songs around the world, I am convinced that Sakura would make the cut.

Melody

While the tonal center is A, the scale used is a pentatonic collection from E to E (E, F, A, B, C, E). In Western, movable do solfeggi: mi, fa, la, ti, do, (mi). In Japanese music, the note collection is referred to as the “In” mode, consisting of syllables kyu–sho–kaku–chi–u–(kyu). The defining characteristics of this mode is the placement of half steps and the skip of a minor 3rd. The mode is associated with more sophisticated folk music for the koto and shamisen. There are various forms of the mode, but Sakura uses the first, unaltered, form. While it is impossible for me as someone who grew up in a Western music folk tradition to hear this melody without the musical lens that I bring, I feel that the ending on “mi” (kyu) rather than the tonic “la” (Kaku) adds an ephemeral characteristic to the melody. The “la” never seems settled and secure—it is always pulling away, begins but never ends a phrase and lends an air of fragility and awareness of mortality to the delicate melody.

Though the range is fairly wide (9th) and the phrases vary in melodic contour, there is a repetition of pitches that brings a comforting familiarity. The return of a melodic pattern is like the return of the blossoms—simple, beautiful and fleeting.

I believe that the very simple and unmistakable melodic material of the opening line is part of the “crossover” draw of this beautiful folk melody. Each phrase is short and relatively simple, but everyone has the imprint of “Sakura”. In fact, of the essentially three melodic chunks that make up the piece, one only needs to hear the opening three notes to instantly recall the entirety of the piece.

Rhythm

There are essentially three rhythmic patterns that make up the entirety of this folk song. Quarter, quarter, half; four quarter notes; quarter, two eighths, half. The rhythms simplicity and consistency helps to unify the construction on the piece in a way that reflects Japanese artistic sensibilities. Like many examples of Japanese folk and flower art, it seems like there is just enough structure to showcase the melody and text. It supports the piece with just enough movement and interest, but in no way distracts or overwhelms the melody.

Harmony

The folksong is a single melodic line with no given harmony. That said, the piece is widely used in ensembles—from traditional folk to modern fusion styles. The A minor pentatonic collection is the basis of standard harmonic options, but the piece is often played in other genres that utilize other harmonic structures and frequently quoted in Chinese and Western modern ensembles.

When I accompany on guitar (in A minor pentatonic), I often use an A minor chord followed by an E minor chord with an added 9th. The fact that no phrase ends on the A keeps the tune from having a traditional A natural minor sound and instead one that seems to float between any settled harmonic placement.

Form

As I mentioned before, the form is dictated by the repeated melodic patterns that consist of two measure phrases.

The overall structure is: A B C B C A D The A phrase begins the piece and nearly ends it with a plea (or invitation) with the final and only distinct phrase ending the melody with a sigh of wonder.

Text

The text that we traditionally sing (in the U.S.) is actually the second verse of a two verse song. The first verse is really similar to the second with only a few lines changed. The first verse mentions fields and villages rather than the spring sky and ends with “Flowers in bloom” instead of “Let’s go see”. I am not sure why we generally see only verse two printed. Both seem equally pronounceable for English speakers. In any case, the spirit of the text is similar in both verses so no major details are left out. The song is not one of those “delivering lots of details through the text” type of songs. The text is poetic and sparse.

<i>sakura sakura</i>	Cherry blossoms, cherry blossoms
<i>yayoi no sora wa</i>	Across the spring sky
<i>mi-watasu kagiri</i>	as far as you can see
<i>kasumi ka kumo ka</i>	Is it a mist, or clouds?
<i>nioi zo izuru</i>	Fragrance fills the air.
<i>izaya izaya</i>	Come now, come now
<i>mini yukan</i>	Let’s look, at last!

The Heart

The heart of Sakura is the fragile, yet entrancing pulse of the opening three notes (just two pitches) that evoke the listener to recall the entirety of the folk melody; as the opening bud of the cherry blossoms remind people of a lifetime of beginnings, endings and springs.

Music Selection Statement (a.k.a. Why this piece is worth doing!)

It is easy to look at Sakura and think, “Of all “Asian” music, this is one that my students can actually learn.” It is essentially three phrases that are memorable. The Japanese language will be somewhat challenging for the students, but all the sounds are present in English. They can read the simple rhythms and the pitches are pentatonic, which is also a master-able concept for young musicians. All of these are reasons why Sakura is an example of a piece that is accessible to an ensemble that is new to non-Western music, but this is not what make the piece great (or art).

We don’t go to a museum and think, “Starry Night is a great work of art because my kindergartners can all do their own knock-off versions” or “e.e. cummings is a great poet to study because my students are often careless about punctuation”. These things all may be true (and sometimes useful) but there is a difference between what makes something teachable and what makes it an imaginative, well crafted, powerful image, set of words or sounds that deserve the title of “great art”. And to mistake a teachable piece for a work of art is often to miss the point of why music education matters in the first place. If our main goal is a quick imitation of a style, number of pieces learned or the ability to accurately name notes, scales or rhythm values, then it would appear that repertoire choice is only relevant in so far as it results in a quick or accurate product. But if one sees art education (and specifically music) as a means of understanding the human condition and a lens through which one can explore layers of thinking and noticing than it is critical that every time a student invests in a piece of music it has a something below the surface that is worth noticing. It is important that not every bit of meaning is uncovered in one hearing, read or viewing, as great art serves a different purpose than a phone book or recipe. There are times and places to gather quick data and then there are moments to notice, reflect, wonder and wrestle. If we want our students to learn the latter, then we must choose repertoire that expects the listener or performer to be “expert noticers”.

With Sakura, it is a difficult distinction. What makes it teachable is related to what makes it a masterwork but there is a subtle difference. There are many pieces with simple rhythms and pentatonic melodies. Sakura’s simplicity meshed with a near symmetry in formal construction with melodic lines that build on the opening two pitches and then invert the new invention. Everything is cleverly related, but at the same time seems new. It manages to capture both a familiarity and wonder at newness

through the form and melodic contour. The rhythm is not written in a simple way so that beginning violinists can play it—the simplicity serves the purpose of communicating exactly what the piece intends to say and does so in the most organic and efficient way.

What I am trying to say is that there are many Sakura imposters—pieces that are constructed to meet technical demands of young players but seem empty and void of deeper layers of beauty. Even the youngest ears can perceive a difference, even if they can not articulate it. By choosing material for young children that is simple enough for them to perform but still has something to say and does so with artistry, we are training their young minds to expect that art has a function greater than building their technical skills. We are teaching them to expect that their deeper noticing yields greater delight.

Skill Outcome

Students will be able to perform, dictate and identify rhythmic patterns including subdivisions up to 16th notes in the context of a musical work by using body motions, number counting and traditional notation names.

Clarification: Often students begin with smaller rhythmic excerpts, read portions of a piece and work from their own compositions and other constructed rhythms at younger ages, but this outcome is designed to build confidence that 3rd grader can apply what they understand about rhythmic notation to be independently literate in the context of an entire musical work.

Strategies

Body Rhythms—Show What You Hear

Remind students of motions for different body rhythms. (Step, quarter note; clap, eighth note; hands together moving, half note; pat leg, 16th notes) and add rests (Ninja, quarter; robot, half)
Use this strategy to solidify hearing isolated rhythms and being able to show back what is given. Transfer the skill into writing or speaking what is given using traditional notation and finally transfer the skill into performing what is already written, including given measures in the context of a piece of music

Put it In the Chairs

Take the Body Rhythms strategy to a different kind of physical/kinesthetic strategy by using 4 chairs to symbolize 4 beat of a measure (or different numbers for different meters) and have the students “be” the notes. (4 kids per chair for 16th notes, etc...)

Name that Tune

Give the students the rhythms only from various familiar songs and have them perform the rhythm (as individuals or can be a group, team game). 2 points for performing the rhythm correctly (with body motions or numbers) and 1 point for naming the song that fits the rhythm.

Team Dictation/Team Read

Each group gets a phrase of rhythm to dictate from hearing it. When the whole piece is heard, they can decide where their rhythm belongs in the context of the whole piece.

For reading a piece that is already given, each team can perform one phrase of music and assess as the other groups do their rhythms.

Moment for Mystery Measure

Tap or write out the rhythm for a measure somewhere in some piece. How quickly can students locate it? (When you find it, sit in lotus! When you find it, strike a tree pose! If you found it, show it with your body after my count to 5! etc.)

As they become more proficient, students can select the and perform and have the class find it.

Related Assessment: Visually, this is regularly an informal assessment. Rather than giving a visual clue that they found it, a note card is placed under each chair and they write down the measure numbers. Collect them on the way out of class.

Puzzle Pieces

Each student (or small groups, depending on how many measures the piece has) has a measure of the piece's rhythm notated. As a class, they need to put the measures in order to complete the song (or phrase). Each person (or group) will perform their measure to see if the song was correctly assembled. Perform the whole piece in body rhythm and then check it with singing the tune and pointing to the notated rhythm..

This activity is highly collaborative and some students will naturally take leadership, but before anyone takes over or the action gets started, students should have 30 seconds or so to really imagine their card in their heads so they get a chance to process it.

There is naturally opportunities for advanced students to lead and for student that don't understand to have peer help in this strategy.

This is not a first week strategy. It should take place closer to class proficiency and when they are able to function with less guidance.

Related Assessment: The teacher should move throughout the class, observing. If there are issues or confusion, ask the student to sing/play what they have to see if the problems are literacy or understanding where things fit in a larger context.

Assessment Strategies

All of the above strategies are truly assessments—the teacher assessing the students, the students assessing each other and students immediately assessing themselves. In addition, these strategies can be easily turned into more formalized assessments. The great thing about taking a known, fun strategy and using it as an assessment is that the format is familiar, it seems like a natural part of the class instead of something completely different (and scarier) and students are less likely to be hampered by anxiety or confused because the format is so unlike the rest of class.

Moment for Mystery, Next Level

Given a score, ask the students to identify a specific measure in the pic by hearing the rhythm only. If there are options (several the same) they can pick one. They can write the measure numbers down on a note card and turn them in on the way out.

It can also be used much less formally as just locating a measure during a class or rehearsal that is going to be a place that is being studied. (Instead of simply saying, "Start at measure 9", say, "Start in in the measure with this rhythm".)

Name the Tune, Next Level

Take the same game played as a team and ask the students to pick one of the ones from the sheet (or one that they find on their own—something that they have the music for) and use one of the iPads to record themselves doing the rhythm for a song of their own—number counting or body rhythms. They can record each other in small groups.

Knowledge Outcome

Students will analyze features of a melody and the affective impact, including comparing and contrasting melodic contours, examining tonality and identifying repeated or related material.

Your Own Collection

After singing major/minor scale pitch collections, ask the students whether or not they think there are other options. (Why or why not?) Must there be 7 different pitches? Remind (or introduce) them to the concept of 5 note pitch collections (pentatonic) and give each group the task of coming up with their own pitch collection. Have students play the “Scale” of their pentatonic creations and play the rhythm to a known pentatonic piece (Mo Li Wa, Sakura, Land of the Silver Birch, Bought Me a Cat). Describe the characteristics of their pitch collection (thoughtful, strong, cheerful, etc...)

Sing Where I Point/Sing Where You Point

Use this strategy to get students really familiar with the pentatonic collections used in various pieces before stepping into reading and analyzing. It is also great scaffolding for most staff reading skill outcomes. In this case, it is being used to remind students of a skill that they have and then to leap into a greater understanding of melody analysis. But to analyze a melody, they need to be able to hear it in their inner ear and this strategy step reminds them of how to do that.

See It, Sing it, Draw it (Variations include: Body Sculpture it or Play Doh it)

From Sing Where I Point, go into see, sing, draw. The students look at the notation and imagine it, sing it one solfeggi and then create their own versions of the drawn melodic contour. (With play doh, they form the line with doh and with body sculpture, groups are called up to form the line with their bodies.) Comment on the similarities of the drawings and what people heard the same. Choose one to put on the board.

Where did it come from? Same/Different/In between?

After reading the melody lines of melody and drawing them, ask the students to think about each line in detail. (Could the piece end here? Why? Why not? What is the idea present in the notes?) Then compare line to each other. Same? Different? Somewhat the same? Don't go for uniform answers here. Have the students discuss with each other, share their findings to the class and see how many reasons they can come up with for how they hear each line. (If the answer, “They are different.”, I'd ask, completely? Which part is different? Is the different idea related to the original phrase? What is borrowed? What is totally new? How can you tell that they belong in the same song? What does this idea follow the other one? Could the order be reverse? etc...)

Mix and Match ABCD

Have the students come up with alternative orders for melodic phrases and try them in a different order. Does it make the piece work better? (likely not, so WHY not?) Why do musical phrases seem to work better in certain orders?

Improvize It

Using the A minor pentatonic collection, give the students 8 beats to show reflections of each phrase on their own Orff instruments. Ask them to pay attention to which ideas were the best reflections and which ideas they thought worked particularly well. It helps to repeat one phrase over and over so they can try a few different ideas with one phrase. Sing 8 beats, play 8 beats, sing, etc...

Assessment Strategies

As with the Skill Strategies and Assessments, these are very connected. The act of a student drawing a melodic contour and the teacher looking at it, the student following it as the melody is sung again and then looking at other students work already includes assessment by self, peer and teacher.

Here are a couple more formal Assessment Strategies for this outcome.

Try it with a new Piece

Listening to a new song, have students label the phrases using letters to show whether they are the same or different. They can add comments behind each letter (like REALLY different, similar, related—but not the same).

Try it with an Old Piece

Take something really familiar, but encourage students to see it with fresh analytical eyes. A piece like Hot Cross Buns or Twinkle Twinkle—what do the phrases have in common? Why does the order matter? Explain what they noticed in the piece that they never really noticed before.

Affective Outcome

Students will reflect on the tendency of humans (themselves included) to bestow meaning on simple objects that goes beyond their practical function. When is a flower not just a flower?

Strategies

Note: Though it seems like there are not lots and lots of strategies here, the ideas listed take quite a bit more time to do well. If not enough time is given to really reflect and discuss these ideas, the answers become very superficial. I have purposely left these strategies a little more sparse. The variety comes when students connect vastly different ideas and feed off of each other. The way that you call on the student without the hand up, acknowledge writing on the bulletin board, and encourage real listening and discussion brings in the differentiation, various learning mode and the feeling that it isn't the same thing again and again. In my experience, the students were most excited about the affective strategies and were so hungry to hear and share.

The Key Question: When is a flower not just a flower?

Beginning: Pose this question right at the beginning. Share a personal story about how a regular thing (for me, a blueberry) has come to represent much more than the practical purpose or the object. Ask them to start reflecting on this idea.

Throughout: Give students a forum for sharing—have it on a bulletin board, ask in class, have them share with a neighbor.

Midway: Where do you see evidence in music, art or poetry that a flower is not always a flower?

Near end: What flowers have you invented?

Which have been handed to you through someone you know?

Which have been passed to you by people you have never met?

Assessment Strategies

I would definitely use the final flower question with the personal reflections as an assessment of a student's ability to understand metaphor and meaning in their own life. In addition, I'd ask for students to make this transfer to other art (visual, music, written).

Write about one piece of music, poem or piece of art and respond to the question "When is a flower not just a flower?" In other words, why is the topic or subject of the art that you chose more than it appears?

Real Life Teaching With This Plan

(How these outcomes and this plan function within a real unit with more than one piece.)

These ideas: 1) Reading rhythms in a holistic way within real musical works, 2) analyzing and comparing/contrasting a melodic phrase and 3) exploring the ways in which humans find meaning in the world around them are outcomes that are broad enough to be taught through a variety of repertoire. In fact, they only really work well when more than one piece of music is examined.

For the purpose of this demo, I have focused on the piece Sakura, but using these same outcomes, we also explored Mo Li Hua (Jasmine Flower, Chinese), Doraji (Korean) and Edelweiss (Sound of Music). We connected a huge variety of other pieces to this Affective Outcome including Four String Winds, Ah Poor Bird, a large number of national anthems and many others. Once students expected that all music was about more than it appears on the surface, they realized connections that went well beyond the repertoire that we were currently singing.

Prepared by Margaret Jenks
IL CMP Summer Workshop 2015
Northern IL University
mjenks@tds.net
414-732-3394