Research to Resources: Appalachian Folklore in the Music Classroom

BY SUZI MILLS AND LISA RUNNER

With a simple assignment, the late Kentucky folklorist and teacher Leonard Ward Roberts generated a vast collection of Appalachian songs and games for children and accounts of folkways of the people of Southern Appalachia. After teaching skills for observation, documentation, and classification of folklore to students in his college classes, he then assigned the task of asking grandparents to remember songs and singing games they played as children. Students later shared these games and songs with one another, giving them the opportunity to transcend the classroom and connect the academic experience with home life and family history.

Roberts was an active researcher and teacher from 1938 until his death in 1981. Love for his homeland in the Cumberland Mountains inspired him to write articles and short stories about the culture of the region. Throughout his life, he furthered folklore as an academic discipline and a cultural treasure by collecting others' stories, along with folk music and games, and then finding venues to share them with audiences of all ages. A distinctive feature of Roberts’ work, however, was his travel to settlement schools and public elementary schools in eastern Kentucky to collect songs from students as they sang, told tales, and played games. This reliance on children for information about songs and games points to an innovative, yet justifiable methodology.

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Several generations who lived throughout the Appalachian region. Although old photographs document that African Americans and other minorities resided in this area during the collection period, there is nothing in Roberts’ notes to indicate that he made any distinction between these individuals and members of the Anglo Saxon majority population.

The cultural informants for this study were selected from traditional musicians, educators, and Roberts’ former students. All three were involved in some way with his work and Kentucky’s southern Appalachian mountain region. All three contributed insights on Appalachian folk life and music during Roberts’ career. Irene Broyles, born in 1922, was selected for her background as an Appalachian mission school student, her experience as a K–12 educator in the eastern Kentucky region, service with Roberts on professional boards, and her work as a collector and promoter of Appalachian and world folk music and dance. Jean Ritchie, also born in 1922, was selected for her scholarship in the area of Appalachian ballads and their origins, her family’s reputation as premier song collectors in the same region as Roberts’ focus, and her

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distinguished career as a performer of Appalachian songs and singing games. The third informant, Alice McLain White, was much younger but lived in a community where many of Roberts’ students attended a settlement school. Her father was a recreation teacher at that school. She also performed in the McLain Family Band, an international touring bluegrass band. At the time of this study, she was a Berea resident and elementary educator.

Archived assignments and notes from Roberts’ college students often contained several variants of the same game or song. Some had been unable to transcribe the melodies their grandparents shared into musical notation, and the researcher found it difficult to recognize their descriptions without a recording or reference to a familiar tune. However, during interviews the cultural informants often mentioned these same singing games in the context of settlement schools and gatherings. They would sing or hum the melodies, thus allowing the researcher to determine which version of a tune might be best to include in a modern-day lesson plan.

Many songs in the Roberts’ Collection shared lyrical content with ancient or regionally documented ballads, poems, and narratives. By today’s standards, some songs and games contained controversial texts or meanings. Informants’ guidance was used in these cases to make decisions about the inclusion of specific verses or texts.

**THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING**

All three primary informants spoke of oral tradition and of the importance of performance or “rendering” of Appalachian music and games as the key to its understanding. This material is not and should not be exactly the same each time it is shared, as the performers and the context will always be different. Tempos change, tunes change, length of musical activity changes, and responses from those present change, unlike composed music that sounds much the same whenever the prescribed score is played. Roberts’ teaching notes likewise reflect his commitment to having students memorize lesson content rather than rely on notation for learning and sharing songs and tales. Remembering her youth, Jean Ritchie stated the following about playing a dulcimer and the concept of playing for an audience:

> It was strictly a personal instrument. You got it down and there’d be somebody playing the dulcimer. The rooms were small, so there wasn’t a problem with it. Once in a while, Dad was just playing something like a ballad that had thirty-five verses, not saying anything, but playing the whole thing and thinking the words, because he didn’t sing with the dulcimer. And you could sort of tell by his facial expression where he was in the story, if you were trying to figure it out. He’d be playing a dance tune or some rhythmical tunes, that is, like “Old Joe Clark.” And we’d gather around and listen to him and before he was finished there were kids standin’ around and listenin’ . . . that kind of audience—but we never said, “Now, I’m going to play the dulcimer, you all come here and listen to me.”

Ritchie and the other cultural informants did not perform with notated music or expect performances of their music to include written musical notation. Although Roberts’ students sometimes included notated transcriptions of the songs they contributed to his collection, Roberts relied more on tape recording for documentation. Alice McLain White corroborated the importance of this method, stating,

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**FIGURE 1: WE’RE WALKING ROUND THE LEVEE**

*(Tune: Go In and Out the Windows)*

Game begins with one person in the middle; other participants form a circle, hands joined.

**We’re walking round the levee, we’re walking round the levee,**

**We’re walking round the levee, for we have gained the day.**

Players in the circle walk clockwise, still holding hands. They stop at the end of the verse and face inward.

**Go in and out the windows . . . .**

Players in the circle, still holding hands, raise their arms to form archways. The individual in the middle weaves in and out through the arches.

**Go up and down the ladder . . . .**

Center player walks in a straight line as far as possible in the circle, then turns and walks as far as possible in the opposite direction. This continues until the verse ends.

**Go forth and face your lover . . . .**

Center player chooses a player in the circle and stands in front of him/her.

**I kneel because I love you . . . .**

Center player kneels in front of the player they selected.

**I measure my love to show you . . . .**

Center player places palms together and then gradually moves hands apart until arms are spread wide.

**Good bye, I have to leave you . . . .**

Center player stands but stays in place while the circle moves to the left, taking the chosen player away.

**I’m coming back to see you . . . .**

Circle moves back to the right, bringing the chosen person back. This player joins the center player in the middle of the ring and the game begins again.
“The notes that are in Appalachian folk music might not be necessarily what we might think is the black dot on the paper. It’s an oral tradition, but my father would tape record every single performance that we did and we would listen to them … so we could do better.”

**CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS**

Two examples of the material found in the Roberts Collection are shared here along with ideas for classroom application. Many others are included in the K–8 lesson plans that were developed as a result of this research study. These plans are available online at the Appalachian Songs and Singing Games Project Web site and are designed for use by general music and social studies teachers.

The Appalachian singing game, “Walking Round the Levee” (fig. 1) might be recognized as “Go In and Out the Windows” or “We’re Marching Round the Levee,” a song also familiar in other areas of the United States. Appalachian mountain children and adults alike might have sung and played this game upon arrival at a work-swapping party thrown for the purpose of corn-shucking, bean-stringing, molasses stirring, or quilting.

Another example combines music with the storytelling tradition of the Appalachian region. The “Swapping Song” (fig. 2) is an additive song with thirteen or more verses that relate the adventures of a young boy who trades as he travels. Jean Ritchie remembers her family referring to it as “this foolish old thing” and enjoying the tongue-twisting refrain with laughter. The “Swapping Boy” is a tale reminiscent of “Jack and the Beanstalk” and is one of its many variants found throughout Appalachia and the storytelling world. No one is ever surprised when Jack displays the typical foolish behavior that Appalachians know and love. Intertwined, the song and story readily create a fun-filled performance for sharing in-class or out.

**CONCLUSION**

The milieu from which folk music emerges is as important to the study of folk music as any other aspect such as form, instrumentation, and repertoire. This study affirms that folklore is a viable and effective method for teaching traditional and world music repertoire. While music teachers and their students sing, play, and learn through involvement in many different types of activities, Roberts’ folkloric approach seems often underutilized when compared with other methodolo-
gies. National standards for music and arts education specify that students at all levels of K–12 education should engage in activities that help them understand music in relation to history and culture.\(^9\) Music education literature repeatedly suggests that in-depth study and performance of at least one musical style other than those provided by classic art music training is an effective method of preparing future music educators to address important music standards for cultural and historical understanding.\(^9\) Increased incorporation of Roberts’ folkloric approach in college music education classes and general music classrooms may, therefore, provide new generations of music educators and their students with an accessible means of experiencing traditional music from Appalachia and around the world.\(^9\)

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1. A complete list of published literature is available at www.music.appstate.edu/AMSSG/index.html.
4. Primary, intermediate, and middle school lesson plans are available at www.music.appstate.edu/AMSSG/.
5. Complete lyrics may be found at www.music.appstate.edu/AMSSG/index.html
7. Story may be found in Old Greasybeard: Tales From the Cumberland Gap by Leonard Roberts, Detroit: Folklore Associates, 1969.