

**An Outsider's View: Nigel Osborne and The Tapestry Partnership
Silk Road to Scotland Project
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“Nigel kneels close to a class of students at Saline Primary to tell the story of walking in a fragrant olive grove in the Qadisha Valley at harvest time and hearing a faint song coming from over the hill. As he turns toward the sound, young Lebanese voices are singing, chanting a song about coming to pick the olives. As the voices of children get nearer, the song becomes clearer, and soon, as Osborne explains, they start the harvest picking. Without more explanation, he introduces the song, first singing the tune with ‘la’ and then adding the Lebanese words as the melody becomes more familiar. Up and on their feet, the students are walking in a circle, staying in the rhythm of the song. They are clapping the beat as well. Osborne sings with more gusto, while reassuring the participants with eye contact and gestural invitations to join in. As excitement builds the class gets louder, “U lu U lu”, and more rhythmic, and then as if passing back down the hill, the song volume is lessened, until it is almost quiet, except for the shuffling of feet and soft claps in rhythm. Then it ends. The group has learned a Lebanese children’s song (in Lebanese Arabic!), understood its context and through the use of dynamics, has created the illusion of distance and space. In tune and in time culturally, and as savory olive oil on bread is sampled by everyone, the group, for a brief moment, is transported among the olive trees.”

Above is a description of a workshop segment that provides an example of why the Tapestry Partnership **Silk Road to Scotland Project** has such potential to be successful as part of the CfE (Curriculum for Excellence). The project’s musical leader, **Nigel Osborne, (Reid Professor of Music at the University of Edinburgh)** **has the energy of a great teacher**. He is also multi-lingual, a skillful storyteller, a multi-instrumentalist and has learned the music of the world first-hand. **His work with children of trauma throughout the world is well documented**. With every note he plays or sings the power of music to “transform lives” comes through. Watching Osborne, the distance between student and teacher is minimized; everyone involved is watching and sharing. He wants each student to build a personal relationship with the music. With this song, students are introduced through participation to a new language, new melody and rhythm, new metric accents, new movements, all contextualized by the story telling and mastery of the singer/leader.

As a Visitor in the University of Edinburgh’s MSc Music in the Community Programme during the fall of 2010, I had the distinct privilege of observing this **new and innovative program** in six schools in Scotland (North Lanarkshire, East Ayrshire and Fife). Designed as a two-year program, it introduces primary and secondary students to the rich cultures associated with the Silk Road, a quasi-imaginary trade route that originated in China and spread to the far corners of Europe.

“Music will be the passport”, according to John O’Dowd of the Tapestry Partnership, but the journey will include many other aspects of culture and society.

I found that my experience with the Silk Road Project was immensely insightful in **answering a concern I have as an American music educator: 1) how to create interdisciplinary activities that foster student creativity.** As I have now learned, there are many projects within the CfE addressing the teaching of creativity, and I hope to get a chance to look closer at many of them in the coming years.

Before I mention some classroom examples, a brief explanation of the planning and training may clarify the project’s creative, global focus. During the months leading up to the school sessions, amateurs (graduate students) from the University of Edinburgh MSc Music in the Community Programme (a nationally acclaimed undergraduate course in Community Music at the University of Edinburgh) met with Professor Osborne and Kimho Ip, a composer. During these training sessions, the idea of “student creativity” came up often, and it showed up as part of every lesson and activity planned by the amateurs. All leaders in this course (Osborne, Issacs and Ip) have developed innovative ways to engage students musically and creatively. I observed in their work the emergence of a “participatory consciousness”, where students start to create a musical life for themselves. In American music education we are often, sadly, focused on the accuracy of group performance, and student creative development is a low priority.

Here are some examples of directives used to develop “musical creativity”;

1) Using the pentatonic pitches of the Chinese tune, Jasmine Flower, create your own melody. How does the melody make you feel? Thinking about the Chinese idea of “flowering” (ornamenting a melody) expand your tune to other instruments with new roles and new textures. As the jasmine flower is to Chinese culture, choose a symbol of Scottish culture and think about how a single melody could illuminate it.

2) Using only percussion instruments, students create a rhythmic background for a kecak (mouth percussion, chanting and dancing) from Indonesia, not forgetting the goal of the music, which is to help motivate the good guys (monkeys) to find the kidnapped princess Sitta. Modernize it. Continue the idea of layering musical lines on top of one another. Western and Indonesian ideas together produce a rich parfait of colors, textures, etc..

3) Improvise with your voice on an Indian raga. After listening carefully to the melodic rules of the particular raga, a student follows the singer with a complimentary phrase, like a question and answer session.

Without the aid of notation, students are learning the nuances of the Indian classical music tradition, and finding their own voice in improvisation. With the help of a constant drone (tonic note), improvised lines get more expressive with each try.

4) Choose an instrument. There are guitars, drums and keyboards, both electronic and acoustic. A soundtrack for a short Japanese animation is to be created. Again, improvisation acts as the first step in making the composition. Instinctively, the students begin by developing musical textures, soundscapes for the “places” in the animation, mostly in free rhythm, without pulse. Everyone is listening very intently. Then they instinctively play more individually, gesturally, and a dialogue begins, and steady rhythms enter in. The students clearly love improvising and can sense when it is going really well. The animateurs and Nigel Osborne watch and listen carefully for interesting musical connections. They allow several versions to happen, stopping between each for reflection.

It was clear that the music teachers at the visited schools all have strong music programs. They were extremely helpful to the animateurs who visited their classes, even though it must have taken time away from their activities. It might have been a little disconcerting to have someone new come into the classroom once a week bringing strange looking instruments, singing in different languages, laying swaths of silk around and opening jugs of aromatic soup. However, the music teachers soon became collaborators, and even during these first four-week sessions, it was clear that **the project had unanimous support from everyone.**

It was inspiring, as well, to see the positive student response to new faces, and new ideas. These **aspects of intercultural music education that are already part of the Scottish curriculum** are only very slowly being introduced into American schools. Books like Teaching Music Globally (Oxford 2004) by Patricia Shehan Campbell are just beginning to be used in teacher training courses.

In closing I look forward to the final student projects to be presented in November of 2012 at the Tapestry Partnership national Silk Road Conference in the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall. I saw in the eyes of both student and animateur the **vast potential inherent in real cultural exchange and understanding.** This is why it was so exciting for me, a college professor from America, to be an observer as the first steps of this wonderful journey were taken.