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Humming history's tune

A Penn Manor High School teacher gets her students' creative juices flowing — and important lessons taught — by using American history documents set to music.

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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - A Penn Manor High School teacher recently used music as a catalyst for critical thinking in her American history class.

But her use of music is nowhere near the likes of "Schoolhouse Rock!" or "The Alphabet Song."

"This is more profound thinking," Lara Paparo says.

Last week, during a lesson on the Indian Removal Act of 1830, Paparo played the song "You Will Go" for her freshman classes.

She's the first history teacher in the nation to use this song in a classroom.

"You Will Go" is part of a musical American history program by Emmy-Award winning composer Lynda Roth of Laguna Beach, Calif.

Penn Literacy Network, a professional development program in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, has partnered with Roth to put her music in classrooms.

Roth's brainchild is called The Muse Project.

Its first program, "America Revealed," is a choral curriculum derived from original texts in American history and literature.

Roth has organized the material into various modules.

The Origins module traces events from Columbus to the Constitution. The Manifest Destiny module examines America's expansion west.

"You Will Go" is part of the Manifest Destiny module. Roth recorded the song in August.

The intention of The Muse Project is to spur creative thinking and bridge multiple subject areas such as literature, history and music.

The songs' intention is also to encourage students to feel how history impacted real people just like themselves.

Several teachers with Penn Literacy Network, including Paparo, are in the process of developing lesson plans to accompany Roth's songs.

The Network intends to have the lessons ready by 2008. While a price has not been determined, the goal is to have music CDs and lesson plans priced low, so individual teachers can afford to buy them.

Paparo is the daughter of Penn Literacy Network's executive director, Bonnie Botel-Sheppard. Her grandfather, Morton Botel, is the program's founder.

Paparo, in her second year of teaching, graduated from the University of Pennsylvania's graduate school of education in 2006.

Paparo's mother and Roth are life-long friends.

Penn Manor is not the only school in the country to introduce Roth's curriculum project.

The choir at Sage Hill School, a private school in Newport Coast, Calif., has learned Roth's songs. A video of the choir singing can be found on Roth's Web site, www.themuseproject.org.

In addition to Penn Manor High School, five schools in the greater Philadelphia area (a combination of middle and high school), will pilot Roth's music in their classrooms between now and January.

In the classroom Thursday, Paparo's students seemed startled by Roth's music.

It's choral and not quite what they expected.

Voices sing:

"You will go where we tell you to go, West of the River Mississippi.

We have the right to remove you from your land

in exchange for another."

After a few seconds, a few smirks, the students settled into it and began writing their thoughts.

Paparo noticed the light bulbs coming on.

She loved it.

"If you can't relate to it, and make it a part of your personal understanding, what's the point in learning it?" Paparo says.

After the song ended, a few of her students pointed out that the lyrics didn't seem to match the music.

Roth said in a phone interview that was intentional.

The song is ironic because the Indian Removal Act is full of contradiction.

"Here we have Andrew Jackson, who did all of these amazing things, yet this wasn't such a good thing he did," she said.

In addition, the document tells the Native Americans that the United States will protect them, but it also reminds them that they must go where they are told. It states that the federal government has ultimate control over their destiny.

Paparo said there are many ways to use such music to teach.

Her way is just one method.

Paparo's idea is to use it to inspire students to capture through art, music, drama or writing how they felt and what they think of the historical documents.

Before she even played the music for her students, she began her lesson with a thinking game of sorts.

She asked her class to imagine someone told them to leave.

What would they do, how they would feel, and where they would go?

Afterward, they read through the Indian Removal Act, rife with legalese and antiquated language.

The students highlighted key words. They wrote down what they thought the document meant.

They seemed to understand it vaguely.

But then she handed her students the lyrics to "You Will Go."

They repeated the same procedure, marking the key words and discussing its meaning.

It was obvious that the students' comprehension improved tremendously.

The music was the next step.

First, they talked about what they thought it might sound like.

Sad and Native American-sounding were some of the speculations.

What they heard instead was voices blending in music reminiscent of a church hymn.

"I liked it," freshman Emily Yinger said of the entire lesson. "I felt really bad for the Indians. The lyrics really helped me to know what (the Act) meant. I feel really sad how we used them."

Freshman Jolene Fisher said: "It made it seem a lot sadder."

The Indian Removal Act alone "seems like one long sentence."

The song did surprise her.

"At first, it seemed kind of cheesy, but then I understood it was making a point."

Freshman Alix Mullins wrote this opinion of the lesson to her teacher: "The music portrayed the U.S. as godly. Also, I could picture it in my head, sort of like a movie. I could see the Native Americans walking toward their new destination because of us."

Not every student liked the music or understood its purpose, Paparo says.

And, that's OK.

One male student said he didn't understand the music part.

But he did write "meaningful responses" to the lyrics, Paparo says.

And, at the end of the lesson, Paparo asked her class to offer examples of other groups forced to leave or told where to go.

The students quickly named the Holocaust, United States internment of Japanese citizens in World War II, slavery, segregation and the oppression of women.

"She's given a dry historical document relevance," Paparo says of Roth's music. "She's conveyed the emotion of it in a way for the students to connect."