


Maya Angelou's Children's Books: Inspiration for Turning Poetry Into Music

General Music Today
2014, Vol. 28(1) 27–28
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Music Education 2014
DOI: 10.1177/1048371314541276
gmt.sagepub.com


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Abstract

This column presents books for children penned by Maya Angelou. These poems and stories, based on her experiences as an African American woman living in the United States, Egypt, Ghana, and South Africa, include extraordinary photography and artwork. Suggestions for inclusion in the general music classroom are provided.

Keywords

composition, creativity, elementary general music, music education, secondary general music, children's literature, language development, world music, culture

Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness.

—Maya Angelou (1974)

As I began my work on this column, I was saddened to hear of the death of Maya Angelou, one of the greatest women African American voices of contemporary literature. She displayed peaceful activism through a multitude of artistic endeavors, including writing, acting, singing, dancing, producing, and directing. Her works and teachings projected an attitude of strength and beauty within diversity, connection rather than disconnection, hope rather than despair, and belief rather than doubt—ideals that many music teachers hope to share with their students.

My recent work with at-risk children in an urban setting has motivated me to seek resources that address the types of difficulties that my students face: poverty, racism, substance abuse, violence, incarceration of family members, and so on. I have found it especially useful to provide these students with models of various art forms that give voice to marginalized populations to serve as inspiration for students to express their own thoughts and ideas through musical improvisation or composition. I am always on the lookout for resources that might deepen my students' understandings of how culture, language, and music are intertwined. I have found several of Maya Angelou's works for children to be appropriate for these purposes. The following works were influenced by her life experiences as an African American woman in the United States as well as Egypt, Ghana, and South Africa.

- *My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken, and Me* (Angelou, 2003) is a story about a South African Ndebele girl whose best friend is a chicken. The book includes beautiful photography of the astounding mural art traditions of the women of the South Ndebele ethnic group.
- *Kofi and His Magic* (Angelou, 1996a) is about the joy that a young Ashanti boy experiences as he uses his powerful imagination to transport him to various locations. It includes full color photographs by Margaret Courtney-Clark.
- *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* (Angelou, 1996b) is a children's picture book with a rhyming poem that celebrates courage. It is edited by Sara Jane Boyers and illustrated with the contemporary urban artwork of Jean-Michel Basquiat. The book includes biographies of the author and the illustrator, both of whom dealt with many difficult life circumstances and found success through creating.
- *Poetry for Young People* (Angelou, 2013), edited and annotated by Dr. Edwin Graves Wilson, PhD, and illustrated by Jerome Lagarrigue, is a collection of 25 poems recommended for ages 8 and older. The oft-quoted poem "Still I Rise" is included

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in this collection, and it represents one of several in this anthology that might be particularly appropriate for troubled adolescents.

General music lessons inspired by these resources might begin by allowing the children to listen to Maya Angelou introducing herself and speaking about how she got her name: www.teachingbooks.net/pronounce.cgi?aid=2698. Next, the teacher might question the students about their own experiences, fears, hopes, and so on, then show them how these experiences might be echoed in the words of Maya Angelou through one of the poems or stories above.

After reading the book *My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken, and Me*, students can listen to the music of Nothembi Mkhwebane, a South African musician who suffered many hardships but never gave up on her dream to be a famous Ndebele singer. A singer, guitarist, composer, producer of children's programs, and director of Nothembi & Son Music, she is known as "The Nbele Queen of Music." More information about this musician can be found at www.nothembi.blogspot.com/.

After reading the book, *Kofi and His Magic*, students could perform one or more of the songs or singing games from the book/CD set: *Let Your Voice Be Heard! Songs From Ghana and Zimbabwe* by Abraham Kobena Adzenyah (Ghana), Dumisani Maraire (Zimbabwe), and Judith Cook Tucker (United States). Also, the premise of imagination as a "magical" resource could be used as a springboard for children's musical improvisation or composition.

Students might also be asked to compare and contrast performing and listening to the "spoken word" found in Maya Angelou's poetry collections with performing and listening to other types of "music." Another resource I have found quite useful for this purpose is *Hip Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry With a Beat*, edited by Nikki Giovanni (2008). In this book/CD set, the voices of Maya Angelou and 41 other poets and musicians are gathered with colorful illustrations by 6 different artists. Many of the poems or pieces are performed by the artists who created them, and others are performed by other poets and artists, as the collection covers many eras and styles, from Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech to Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and from the Sugarhill Gang's recording of a portion of "Rapper's Delight" to Queen Latifah reading the poem "Ladies First."

Children could be encouraged to write their own poetry and turn these poems into song. The book *The Word in Play: Language, Music, and Movement in the Classroom* by Judith Thomas and Susan Katz (2003) provides specific

lesson plans that can be used to help children compose their own poetry, music, and movement.

Sometimes in our hurry to introduce children to the many musical cultures of the world or the cultures of their ancestors, we forget to tap into our students' own life experiences as a source of cultural awareness. Each of our students has much to offer, and the inspirational words of poets such as Maya Angelou can serve as sources of guidance for children when they find themselves struggling with life's challenges. General music class is an ideal setting in which to encourage students to explore their own experiences and to write poetry and lyrics in order to express their own ideas and dreams through words and music.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Author Biography

Amy C. Beegle, PhD, has twelve years of general music teaching experience with children in public and private schools. She currently teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in general music methods, urban music education, and curriculum and assessment and also works with college interns to provide weekly music classes for children of parents undergoing substance abuse treatment in Cincinnati.