Teaching with Primary Sources—MTSU

BARBARA ALLEN: THE EVOLUTION OF FOLK SONGS

OVERVIEW

Students will listen to several performances of the ballad “Barbara Allen” and compare the transcripts, which they will analyze for insights into the ballad as a part of oral tradition.

GOAL

Understand how a folk song can persist in a culture for hundreds of years because and in spite of how it evolves.

OBJECTIVES

The learner will
- Understand the characteristics of the folk song and the ballad
- Understand that ballads were passed down within a culture as part of an oral tradition (memorization, etc.), and how a song can change and evolve during that process
- Understand that folk songs and ballads were the popular music/entertainment of their time

INVESTIGATIVE QUESTION

How does a folk song evolve over time?

“Wife, children, & friends, together with Bonny Barbara Allan.” [n.d.]

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CURRICULUM STANDARDS

5th Grade Music:
- 5.GM.R1.A Demonstrate and explain, citing evidence, how selected music connects to and is influenced by specific interests, experiences, purposes, or contexts.
- 5.GM.R1.B Demonstrate and explain, citing evidence, how responses to music are informed by the structure, the use of the elements of music, and context (such as social, cultural, and historical) through various means (such as manipulatives, movement, and/or pictorial representation).
- 5.GM.R1.C Demonstrate an understanding of the elements of music applied to a listening example using teacher-given vocabulary (such as different sections of complex forms, teacher-selected orchestral instruments, etc.).

5th grade English Language Art
- 5.RL.KID.1 Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- 5.RL.KID.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a story, drama, or poem and explain how it is conveyed through details in the text; summarize the text.

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Curriculum Standards (cont.)

- 5.RL.CS.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language with emphasis on similes and metaphors; analyze the impact of sound devices on meaning and tone.
- 5.RL.CS.5 Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fit together to provide the overall structure of particular texts.

6-8th Grade General Music

- 6-8.GM.Cn2.A Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.
- 6-8.GM.R3.A Apply teacher-provided criteria to evaluate musical works or performances.
- 6-8.GM.R2.A Describe a personal interpretation of how creators’ and performers’ application of the elements of music and expressive qualities, within genres and cultural and historical context, convey expressive intent.

6-8th English Language Art

- 6.RL.IKI.7 Compare and contrast the written version of a story, drama, or poem to the experience of listening to or viewing an audio, video, or live production of a text.
- 7.RL.KID.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary.
- 7.RL.CS.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including allusions to other texts and repetition of words and phrases.
- 7.RL.IKI.7 Compare and contrast a written story, drama, or poem to its audio, filmed, staged, or multimedia version, analyzing the effects of techniques unique to each medium.

Materials

- Lyrics Comparison Handout
- Barbara Allen Worksheet

Resources:

- Lyrical Legacy: Bonny Barbara Allen
- Barbara Allen [Audio], Virginia Meade, performer. (In 2 parts.)
- Disc 02, Side B: The Girl with the Striped Stockings; Barbara Allen [Audio], Captain Pearl R. Nye, performer. (“Barbara Allen” begins at 2:05 of this recording.)
- Barbara Allen [Audio], George Vinton Graham, performer.
- Bonny Barbara Allen (broadsheet) and transcript

George Vinton Graham with guitar, seated, right profile, looking downwards, portrait, photograph photographed by Sidney Robertson Cowell, [1938 or 1939]
PROCEDURE

Step 1: Preparation: You may wish to read the Library’s introduction to “Bonny Barbara Allen” in Lyrical Legacy and consider how to divide your students into groups before class. Pass out the Barbara Allen Worksheet to each student. Students should be given a few minutes to answer the appropriate question after each related step of the lesson. You may wish to assign the final question as homework. Do not distribute the Lyrics Comparison Handout, broadside, and transcript until Step 5.

Step 2: Explain to students that one of the key characteristics of folk music is that it is part of an oral tradition, meaning that it was not originally written down as music or lyrics but was passed from person to person and generation to generation as people learned the song from other singers. Songs were learned from family members or other members of the community as part of their common culture. Ask students to think about any songs they have learned this way. (Lullabies, children’s songs, camp songs, etc). Are there any they could sing right now? Do any of your students know the same songs? Where did they first hear those songs?

Step 3: Explain that a ballad is a type of folk song that tells a story. “Barbara Allen” is a British ballad that was brought to America by immigrants and is one of the most popular and widespread ballads that has survived. We know that it was sung at least as far back as 1666. Listen to the recording of Virginia Meade singing in Hollywood, California on June 3, 1939 (in two parts). Ask students what they notice about this song. Ballads like “Barbara Allen” were the popular music of their day. How is this song different from or similar to the popular songs students hear on the radio today?

Step 4: Explain that over time, as people moved across the Atlantic and spread across the United States, they took songs like “Barbara Allen” with them. These songs adapted and changed just as the people who sang it did. Without written lyrics, each new singer depended on what he or she heard and could remember from the previous one. As a result many versions of “Barbara Allen” have been found at different times and places. Explain that the class will be doing an experiment to demonstrate one way changes can develop. Divide the class into groups of 6 or 7. Using the Bonny Barbara Allen broadside, choose a line (or set of lines, depending on grade level) for each group. Allow one student in each group to study the group’s selection for a minute or two. Then tell that student to whisper what they read to another member of the group, and that student to the next, and so on, until the last student has heard the line. After each student has passed on the line(s), he or she should write down what they repeated on an index card. Have the last student in each group write the line(s) he or she heard on the board, arranging the lines in the order they appear in the ballad. How different is the result from the original? Have each group read their index cards in order so the class can hear how the differences developed from person to person.

OPTIONAL EXTENSION—Play the Virginia Meade performance a second time, asking students to listen as carefully as possible. Then have students write down as much of the song as they can remember. How many times do you think you would have to hear the song to remember it well enough to sing it yourself?

Step 5: To explore how this accumulation of small differences eventually developed into the many versions we have today, play the Captain Pearl R. Nye (“Barbara Allen” starts at 2:05 of the recording) and George Vinton Graham (the second recording on the page) performances for the class. Ask a student to read the Bonny Barbara Allen transcript aloud. How do these three performances sound different from or similar to Virginia Meade’s? Divide the class into small groups and give each group a copy of the Lyrics Comparison Handout (2 pages) and copies of the broadside and transcript. Explain that the handout includes transcripts of the two recorded performances they’ve just heard, while the broadside is a published version printed in Boston. Ask the groups to study the three versions and mark all the similarities and differences they can find.

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EXTENSIONS

Another characteristic of ballads is that they were often based on real events, or believed to have been based on real events, even once it was no longer remembered when or where the event happened. Have each group pick a current or recent event and write a short ballad (three or four stanzas) about it. If possible, have each group also pick a tune and sing their ballad for the class.

EVALUATION

Use the following rubric to evaluate student participation in group work and discussion.

90-100 Thoroughly fills out the Barbara Allen handout and frequently participates in class activities and discussions.

80-89 Fills out most of the Barbara Allen handout and participates in class activities and discussions.

70-79 Fills out some of the Barbara Allen handout and participates in some class activities and discussions.

69 and below Only minimally fills out the Barbara Allen handout and does not participate in class activities and discussions.

Step 6: Have the class consider the similarities and differences discovered in Step 5. Can all of the changes be accounted for by the process of oral transmission? (Mishearing and misremembering lyrics.) What other reasons might lead singers to change the lyrics? Do any of the lyrics always stay the same? Why do you think that is?

Step 7: Continue to study the Lyrics Comparison Handout and broadside. Consider the story being told in each. Do the differences in the lyrics change that story? Some versions contain more verses than others. Does it change the effect of the song if parts are left out? As a class, determine the essential elements of the story, regardless of the words with which it is told. Who are the main characters? What key events occur? What is necessary for “Barbara Allen” to be “Barbara Allen” and not some other

Step 8: Artists have recorded many modern renditions of “Barbara Allen.” Listen to this version by Emmylou Harris. How is it different from the traditional versions? How has it been adapted to sound more like the music popular today?

PROCEDURE (CONT.)

Photograph of Captain Pearl R. Nye Seated [n.d.]
1. (Step 4)
How much did your group’s line(s) change? Did the result still make sense? Why do you think that happened?

2. (Step 5)
Which of these versions do you prefer? Why?
3. (Step 7)
Summarize the story of “Barbara Allen” in a paragraph. How would you retell this story in a modern setting?

4. (Step 8)
What changes would you make to the ballad if you were going to sing it now? Would you change the lyrics at all? The story? Would you sing it with music or without? Why?
LYRICS COMPARISON HANDOUT

Bar'bry Allen
Graham, George Vinton [md] singer

It was in the merry month of May,
And the green buds were a-swelling;
Young Jimmy Grove on his death bed lay,
For the love of Barb'ry Allen.

"Had I a man, a man, a man,
A man within my dwelling
That could write a letter with my blood
And carry it to Barb'ry Allen!"*

Then he sent his man to Scarlet Town,
To the place where she did dwell in
"Oh, come unto my master dear
If your name be Barb'ry Allen."*

Then slowly, slowly she rose up,
And slowly, slowly left him,
And to his friends she only said
That death of life had reft him.**

"Oh, mother, mother, make my bed.
Oh, make it soft and narrow.
Young Jimmy died for me today,
I'll die for him tomorrow.

"No chain shall go about my neck,
No ring go on my finger,
No fire bright, no candle light,
I can no longer linger."*

A great procession from the village goes;
In the church yard side by side they lay.
Then out of her grave there grew a red rose,
And out of his, a green briar.*

"Here's adieu to my friends all around,
But a woe to Barb'ry Allen!" *
In Scarlet town where I was born,
There was a fair maid dwelling.
Made every youth cry "Well aware,"
And her name was Barbara Allen.

All in the merry month of May,
When the green buds were a-swelling.
Sweet William came from western states,
And courted Barbara Allen.

All was in the month of June,
When all things were a-blooming.
Sweet William on his deathbed lay,
For the love of Barbara Allen.

He sent his servants to the town,
Where Barbara was a-dwelling.
"My master's sick and sends for you,
If your name is Barbara Allen."

"And death is painted on his face,
And o'er his heart is stealing.
Then haste away to comfort him,
Oh lovely Barbara Allen."

So slowly, slowly she got up,
And slowly she came nigh him.
And all she said when she got there,
"Young man, I think you're dying."

"Oh yes, oh yes, I'm very sick,
And death is on me stealing.
No better no, I'll never be,
If I can't have Barbara Allen."

"Oh yes, you're sick, and very sick,
And death is on you dwelling.
No better no, you ne'er will be,
For you can't have Barbara Allen."

Oh don't you remember in yonder town,
When you were at the tavern.
You drank a health to the ladies all around,
And slighted Barbara Allen."

As she was on her highway home,
The birds kept on a-singing.
They sang so clear they seemed to say,
"Hard hearted Barbara Allen."

As she was walking o'er the fields,
She heard the death bell knelling.