

Never Sing the Same Way Twice: Encouraging Student Voice with Umm Kulthum

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Abstract

Umm Kulthum is one of the most important twentieth century musicians to come from the continent of Africa. Her impeccable musicianship, strong business acumen, drive to work on all aspects of her craft, and ability to create her own musical opportunities, as a Muslim woman in a traditionally male dominated industry, are great examples for students in the School District of Philadelphia. This unit uses the life and music of Umm Kulthum to encourage students to find their own voice through music composition and performance in the classroom and in podcast form. Students will compose music in the style of Umm Kulthum, perform this music in a classroom performance, and record these performances for distribution to families and students as evidence of learning and as a classroom podcast. The student produced podcast will serve as a recording of the classroom performance, and as a document of student interest and learning. This unit is designed for High School music students in a general music setting, but can easily be adapted for instrumental, vocal, or music technology classrooms.

Keywords

Music, Africa, Egypt, Voice, Performance, Improvisation, Rhythm, Harmony, Melody, Poetry, Business, Technology, Umm Kulthum, Piano, Keyboard, Drum

Content Objectives

Students in the school district of Philadelphia have historically had music classes cut from the curriculum, and music teacher positions cut or frozen when district budgets run low. Specifically, the cuts during the budget crisis of 2013 eliminated music from many schools in the district (Muse 2013). Though there are more now, these cuts over the years have taken away important musical opportunities from students in neighborhood schools without support from outside groups.

Traditionally, music education has been centered on the experience of white Europeans. College music theory classes teach monastic traditions and how to write baroque counterpoint, with white male composers largely taking precedence over other genres and musical voices. Music and musicians with black and brown skin have been historically overlooked and looked down upon by the music education institutions.

The school music experience gap is real. Students have musical talent, and drive, but haven't had the encouragement or opportunity inside school to show what they can do. Several years before I came, studio equipment was purchased for Mansion by a famous musician. Most of it had been locked away for safe keeping. The music instruction books that I could find were old, moldy, and full of traditional European centered music, with musical examples and drawings that were not representative of the student population.

Students at Strawberry Mansion High School have not had the opportunity to learn about music in a school setting, and often have had the music that they listen to and identify with put down and marginalized by adults and music teachers. Despite a great history of music and music performances, many students are unwilling to share their voice in music class. Several students in my classes at Mansion have been accomplished drummers, rappers, singers, and pianists. During the school day, they have been unwilling to share that give in front of their peers in a classroom setting.

In my first year of teaching music at Strawberry Mansion High School, I was welcomed by the community with open arms. There hadn't been a full-time music teacher there since the 2011-2012 school year. I began in January of 2019, with full support from the school and district administration. Students were glad to be in music classes but lacked confidence in their musical abilities. A lack of continuous and culturally relevant music instruction helped to create roadblocks to student learning, particularly when they were asked to do activities that were outside of the scope they had experienced before.

After a time, when students became more comfortable with me, several shared their music with me in private. Several student rappers showed me music videos of their performances, and one student showed me his performances with a local drum line. I was sad and ashamed that I could not encourage them to share their musical talents by performing with our new in school music groups (choir, drum line, modern band ensemble), and have made it my goal to encourage student musical expression in a culturally relevant way.

That is why I chose to apply for this Teacher Institute of Philadelphia seminar, Listening to the Music of Contemporary Africa: History, Politics, And Human Origins. The centering of the Black experience in the music classroom by focusing on the music of Africa was intriguing to me, and important to my students.

In this unit I hope to bridge this divide between what with an activity where students compare the music and musicians, they know to Umm Kulthum, and compose music by ear, perform the works they compose as a group, record the pieces, and discuss the process and recording itself in podcast form. Umm Kulthum's musical genius, business acumen, and status as a cultural icon in Egypt and the Arab World as a launching point into this work.

Then in the order you have from here on. During the seminar, I came to understand more fully that African Americans are not the only group that hails from the continent of Africa. All of humanity comes from Africa. The story of African music is not just for Brown and Black skinned people, instead it is the origin story for all of music education.

This unit aims to give all students authentic musical experiences. Composition, learning to play musical parts by ear, and performing a student composed song are the main sections of this musical unit. This unit focuses on one of the greatest singers in the history of the world, Umm Kulthum. After composing the song, students will record their own versions and place them in a student podcast to replicate the experience many Egyptians had of listening to Umm Kulthum's performances with family members and friends with their own families.

Note to teachers: The goal of this unit is to have students compose and perform a musical work in the style of Umm Kulthum. This could be done in many ways, depending on the musicians you have in your classroom, and what interests them. Below I will share some important information about Umm Kulthum, and what makes her an important voice for our students.

Please adjust any material that is being included to fit your music classroom. The classroom activities and learning exercises are intended to be a split up for a two-week

time. The new skills will need to be practiced, and students will need many chances to play together to feel comfortable.

Who was Umm Kulthum?

Al Bustan Seeds of Culture, an Arab music non-profit in Philadelphia, describes Umm Kulthum as one of the greatest Arab musicians who ever lived. She started singing at a very young age, and as her artistry grew, so did her popularity and audience. By the end of her career, her voice was heard not only in Egypt, but across the Middle East by millions of people in monthly live radio broadcasts.

During Umm Kulthum's lifetime there were three main musical behaviors in Egypt: the act of performing music, listening to a musical performance, and speaking about music and performances (Danielson, 1997). For decades, Umm Kulthum's monthly broadcasts were a cultural touchstone. Families would gather around the radio, to listen to her performances with her orchestra.

“In her monthly Thursday night concerts, her voice flooded the radio waves across the middle east. Listeners sat attentive, minding every undulation in awe of the vocal control for which she was renowned. Almost as anticipated as her concerts, the aftermath of critiques and reviews of her performance would permeate daily life for days and weeks after. She had earned herself the title, “the voice of Egypt” (Danielson, 1997)

The story of Umm can resonate with students from all backgrounds. She started out with nothing, and through hard work, smart decisions, and artistic bravery she was able to have her voice heard by millions.

Timeline: Al Bustan Seeds of Culture has created a timeline for Umm Kulthum's life (*see Teacher References*). Below are summaries of the important sections of Umm Kulthum's life, taken from Virginia Danielson's book *The Voice of Egypt* and the Al Bustan seeds of culture curriculum unit on Umm Kulthum. Students will be asked to compare artists they appreciate today to Umm Kulthum, to appreciate her accomplishments and significance.

Early Life: Umm Kulthum was born in the Nile Delta sometime near 1890. Her exact birth date is not known. Around the age of 7 she started singing at ceremonies and parties. The culture at that time restricted female access to certain areas, so her father dressed her up as a boy so she could go to performances! She sang with her father in ceremonies around their rural area. “People were awestruck at the power of her voice, coming from someone so young” (Danielson, 1997). Her family made the decision to move to Cairo, the largest city in Egypt, to further her music career.

Transition to the Big City: When her family moved to Cairo in the 1920s, she started taking music lessons with private teachers. Women were not permitted in the Oriental Music Club (Al Bustan Seeds of Culture, 2012). She still wore traditional men's rural garb. People recognized the power of her voice, but she realized that she would have to do more to reach a broader audience.

Mastering her Craft: In 1926, Umm Kulthum signed a contract with Gramophone Records. She updated her style, stopped wearing men's clothes, and started wearing conservative dresses with sleeves. She also stopped performing with her family and hired a takht to be her backing orchestra.

“She would be accompanied by a takht, an ensemble of musicians seated behind her. She thus transformed her identity by finding a group of the most talented musicians to comprise her takht.” (Danielson, 1997)

She also started performing songs by popular poets and composers and appeared in films. She produced and acted her own films, and because she was so popular, she had great creative input for the films. They included musical performances and cemented her as an artist of great renown.

Apex and Legacy: Umm Kulthum put on live performances on the first Thursday of every month for decades. These live broadcasts of concerts were listened to by not only Egypt, but throughout the middle east.

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A good parallel with our generation is the super bowl halftime show. That is the one biggest musical performance every year, and many people watch it, and have opinions about it. In the same way, the Middle East buzzed in response to her Thursday night concerts every month. She carved that legacy herself with smart planning, and an intense work ethic and performance schedule.

The main concert this unit focuses on is the one time Umm Kulthum performed outside of the Middle East. In 1967, she went on a concert tour to support the Egyptian government. Raising funds for the state treasury. “She was the voice and face of the nation across all the Middle East. She served as a cultural ambassador for Egyptians and Arabs alike.” (Al Bustan Seeds of Culture, 2012). When she died in 1975, four million

people filled the streets of Cairo and carried her to her final resting place. **Classroom Composition: Performance and Playing by Ear**

Students will compose a song in the style of Umm Kulthum and her orchestra. This song will be based off a recording of their monumental 1967 Paris performance of the song “Enta Omri”, which translated to English is “You Are My Life”. Students take turns as soloist, percussionists, and orchestra members. All students will, as a group, compose a classroom performance using improvised solo lines, and composed orchestral responses.

Student Podcast Extension: A Document of Student Learning

Umm Kulthum’s radio broadcasts were a regionwide event for decades. Families everywhere listened raptly to the performances, often in tea or coffee shops gathered as a community. Afterward, the artists phrasing, text choices, vocal virtuosity, and raw emotion were regular topics of discussion. Students will create a classroom podcast of the performance and document their learning about Umm Kulthum’s life and legacy. Students can record these podcasts individually or in small groups. Each student podcast should be short (See Teacher Worksheet 4), possibly 3 to 4 minutes at maximum. Students should choose what part of this assignment was most meaningful to them. Maybe it was learning about improvisation, or facts about Umm Kulthum. The podcasts will be for parents, teachers, or the school community at large. Having a record of student learning is an important part of teaching. These can be a great memento of student achievement and creativity.

Teaching Strategies

A coherent teaching plan for those objectives. The section will detail, in narrative form, the learning strategies that best match the subject matter you are introducing.

1. Flexible Grouping
2. Activating Prior Knowledge
3. Practice
4. Integration of Content Ideas
5. Music and Songs
6. Summarizing
7. Student Self-Assessment.

Classroom Activities

Composing and performing a song in the style of Umm Kulthum and her orchestra.

These activities can be used in any music classroom. They are presented here for a General Music Classroom with Electronic Keyboards. Teachers, please take the parts of this that work for your classroom and use them to increase your student's confidence in composition and performance.

Classroom Activities Tasks I: Student Performance

1. *Students will be able to compare Umm Kulthum to artists that are important to them in order to understand Umm Kulthum's significance and relevance to their lives today. Students will find examples from their musical background that are like Umm Kulthum.*

Lesson 1: Introduction to Umm Kulthum

- Students will read GQ article about Umm Kulthum.
- Teacher will lead a discussion on the importance and power of Umm Kulthum. Exploring her musical and cultural impact as a powerful African woman and artist. Umm Kulthum's early life, developmental period, and greatest artistic achievements will be compared to artists students are familiar with.
- Students will compare artists in their own musical background with Umm Kulthum and present them to the class. These worksheets will be saved to be added to the classroom podcast at the end of the unit. (*See Student Worksheet #1*)

Lesson 2: Listening exercise "Exploring the Music of Umm Kulthum"

- Teacher will lead a listening exercise using the video of her Paris 1967 concert. Focusing on the interplay of the singer and the orchestra, the rhythm section, and the vocal powers of Umm Kulthum.
- Students will focus on the singer. The melody she is creating rises and falls to help carry the meaning of the text. After one of her phrases, the orchestra will sometimes repeat the line, and sometimes pick up the line where the singers stops.
- Students will learn and practice a five note scale on their instrument in preparation for composing and improvisation. The scale itself will need be dependent on what kind of music the teacher is teaching in (*See Teacher Reference Sheet #1*).

- Teacher closes section with facts about Umm Kulthum's Paris performances. This unit's goal is for the student to compose a song in the style of Umm Kulthum.

2. *Students will be able play rhythm and pitched instruments, by ear, and compose musical phrases in the style of a song by Umm Kulthum in the chosen scale in order to compose and perform an entire song in the style of Umm Kulthum.*

Lesson 3: Rhythm in Umm Kulthun's Orchestra

- Teacher will teach body percussion in the style of Umm Kulthum's percussionist. "Felt but not heard" should be the musical idea behind any body percussion activities.
- Student will listen to the orchestra, focusing their ear on what is being played by the percussion section of the orchestra.
- Teacher demonstrates how body percussion can be used to
- Student will break into small groups, each group will compose a rhythmic ostinato that could back up the soloist and orchestra.

Lesson 4: Improvising a solo line with feeling and emotion

- Teacher will play the Paris video, and students will listen while reading along with the English translation. Why does Umm Kulthum sing in certain ways? How is she using the melody to convey feeling?
- Students will practice composing music lines while playing patterns in the class scale. First the teacher can model improvisational lines, and have students answer back. Try to show emotion in each scale. For instance, if a student is feeling happy, how can they play their solo line to show this? Maybe it's by using shorter rhythms, or an ascending line? It's up to the student to decide.
- Students will take turns taking the lead position. Doing the teachers job, one soloist student will improvise lines in the 5 to 8 note scale, and the other students will echo back what is being played. Take turns as the soloist, letting each student get the chance to lead the orchestra.

3. *Students will compose the orchestral responses and melodic lines for their classroom performance of this song in the style of Umm Kulthum.*

Lesson 5: Compose Orchestral Responses to a soloist.

- Teacher will play the video of the 1967 performance, with students listening to the orchestral responses. Notice how they echo, or take the melody from the singer.
- Student will individually compose one response that can be repeated. This response should be in the 5 note scale, and should be no more than 4 bars.
- Students will group up, and take turns being the soloist or orchestra.
- Teacher will encourage when students add their own musical influences to the rhythm parts and the scale.

Lesson 6: Putting it all together

- Students will prepare responses for the performance (See teacher reference sheet #3). Separating into three groups, soloists, percussionist, and orchestra players, students will perform the roles of Umm Kulthum and her orchestra in a classroom performance.
- Teacher will assist students to organize the performance by helping soloists get into order, the orchestra choosing responses, and the percussion adding their own flavor while supporting the melodic players.
- Teacher will record the audio of the performance to add to the classroom podcast.

Extension: Classroom Podcasts

1. *Students will take the recording of their performance, and add text from their learning of Umm Kulthum in lesson one to create a podcast.*
- This could take several class periods, depending on how many students and a teacher's specific classroom technology setup.
 - Students will watch the video "Why is Umm Kulthum Loved in the Arab world".

- Students will write a short text to be added to the class podcast, telling why Umm Kulthum is important, and how she is similar to artists from the students own experience.

Podcast Steps:

1. Write Script.
2. Student Recordings of prepared scripts.
3. Prepare audio clips and arrange them in order.
4. Add any extras to give the podcast flavor.
5. Export and share with students, families, and the school community.

Resources

Three annotated lists of materials you have reviewed: a bibliography for teachers, reading list for students, and a list of materials for classroom use.

Annotated Bibliography for Teachers:

Danielson, Virginia. *The Voice of Egypt, UMM Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Societ in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago. 1997

Watson, Scott. *Using Technology to Unlock Musical Creativity*. Oxford. 2011

Hammond, Zaretta. *Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain*. 2015

Al Bustan Seeds of Culture: Umm Kulthun Educational website:

<http://albustanseeds.org/digital/kulthum>

Al Bustan Seeds of Culture: Umm Kulthun Timeline:

<http://albustanseeds.org/digital/kulthum/pdf/Al-Bustan-UK-Timeline.pdf>

Umm Kulthun London Performance of Enta Omri with Translation.

<https://youtu.be/XPGHpBOt5sE>

Umm Kulthun Alfi Leila W-Leila with Translation. <https://youtu.be/nbW AyxPyyJw>

Umm Kulthum Ibrahim, Harvard Magazine. 7.1997
<https://www.harvardmagazine.com/1997/07/umm-kulthum-ibrahim>

Afropop.org Interview with Virginia Danielson. <https://afropop.org/articles/7799>

Afropop Worldwide Hip Deep Podcast on Umm Kulthum. <https://afropop.org/audio-programs/umm-kulthum-the-voice-of-egypt>

Umm Kulthum: A voice like Egypt. Documentary <https://youtu.be/uLfONsv8BEI>

Forever Mansion? Inside the quest to save Strawberry Mansion High School – Philadelphia Inquirer, Kristen Graham. 2019.
<https://www.inquirer.com/education/a/strawberry-mansion-high-school-revival-philadelphia-school-district-20190327.html>

Budget Cuts set to silence the music at Philly Schools – NBC Philadelphia, Queen Muse. 2013. <https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/philly-students-face-uncertainties-school-cutbacks-music/1984816/>

Reading List for Students:

Why Umm Kulthum is loved throughout the Arab World. <https://youtu.be/IJZ1UBnMfXA>

Led Zeppelin, Bob Dylan, and U2, How Umm Kulthum’s Influence Transcended the Middle East. <https://www.gqmiddleeast.com/culture/a-voice-that-could-shatter-glass>

Harvard Magazine – Umm Kulthum Ibrahim.
<https://www.harvardmagazine.com/1997/07/umm-kulthum-ibrahim>

Al Bustan Seeds of Culture: Umm Kulthun Educational website:
<http://albustanseeds.org/digital/kulthum>

Classroom Materials:

Translation of “Enta Omri” Arab Song Tranlations by Lennie Clark.
<http://www.shira.net/music/lyrics/inte-omri.htm#LindaGrondahl>

Al Bustan Seeds of Culture: Umm Kulthun Educational website:
<http://albustanseeds.org/digital/kulthum>

Why Umm Kulthum is loved throughout the Arab World. <https://youtu.be/IJZ1UBnMfXA>

Led Zeppelin, Bob Dylan, and U2, How Umm Kulthum's Influence Transcended the Middle East. <https://www.gqmiddleeast.com/culture/a-voice-that-could-shatter-glass>

Appendix

PA Standards

Standard 9.1.8.A

Know and use the elements (duration, intensity, pitch, timbre) and principles (composition, form, genre, harmony, rhythm, texture) of music to create works in the arts and humanities.

Standard 9.1.8.B

Recognize, know, use and demonstrate a variety of appropriate arts elements (sing, play an instrument, read and notate music, compose and arrange, improvise) and principles to produce, review and revise original works in the arts.

Standard 9.1.8.C

Identify and use comprehensive vocabulary within each of the arts forms.

Standard 9.1.8.D

Demonstrate knowledge of at least two styles within each art form through performance or exhibition of unique works.

Standard 9.1.8.E

Communicate a unifying theme or point of view through the production of works in the arts.

Standard 9.1.8.F

Explain works of others within each art form through performance or exhibition.

Standard 9.1.8.G

Explain the function and benefits of rehearsal and practice sessions.

Standard 9.1.8.H

Demonstrate and maintain materials, equipment and tools safely at work and performance spaces.

Standard 9.1.8.J

Incorporate specific uses of traditional and contemporary technologies within the design for producing, performing and exhibiting works in the arts or the works of others.

Standard 9.2.8.A

Explain the historical, cultural and social context of an individual work in the arts.

Standard 9.2.8.B

Relate works in the arts chronologically to historical events.

Standard 9.2.8.C

Relate works in the arts to varying styles and genre and to the periods in which they were created.

Standard 9.2.8.D

Analyze a work of art from its historical and cultural perspective.

Standard 9.2.8.E

Analyze how historical events and culture impact forms, techniques and purposes of works in the arts.

Standard 9.2.8.G

Relate works in the arts to geographic regions: Africa, Asia, Australia, Central America, Europe, North America, South America

Standard 9.2.8.I

Identify, explain, and analyze philosophical beliefs as they relate to works in the arts.

Teacher Reference Sheet 1: Teaching Audiation and the Scale

1. Choose the scale for your students to improvise in *in accordance to what is appropriate to where they are*. For my beginning keyboard students, I am going to start with the **a minor scale** because it's easy to identify and play on the piano. Guitar students could play in e minor, or band students could play in c minor. Pick one that will be easy and developmentally appropriate.
2. When introducing the scale, it's important to have the students audiate the notes as well as play them. I would **start with them singing the scale**, call and response style, after you play it. Work your way up to 5 or 6 notes, alternating students singing and playing. Example
 - a. Example sequence in a minor (keyboard class)
 1. Teacher starts a rhythmic ostinato in the background (drum machine, riqq recording, etc... a connection to student music tastes is helpful here)
 2. Teacher Sings 2 to 3 note pattern
 3. Student Sings response back to teacher
 4. Teacher Plays 2 to 3 note pattern
 5. Student Plays 2 to 3 note pattern
 6. Teacher informally uses formative assessment techniques to make sure the students are singing and playing in the desired melodic and rhythmic patterns.
3. **Important Point:** *Flexibility is key here*. Students may add an extra note, or start playing notes from a familiar song...it is more important to encourage them to create than it is to correct them about specific musical details when first teaching the music.

Teacher Reference Sheet 2: Teaching Body Percussion

1. For the classroom percussion, it's important to have students play in a supportive manner.
2. When introducing the ostinato, it's important to have the students audiate the rhythms, as well as play them. I would **start with playing body percussion**, with students joining the ostinato with a part that they create themselves.
 - a. Teacher demonstrates example sequence, with students joining in quietly.

1. Teacher starts a rhythmic ostinato
 2. Students, one by one, repeat the ostinato back to the teacher
 3. Students work in groups to create rhythmic parts
 4. Teacher informally uses formative assessment techniques to make sure the students are singing and playing in the desired melodic and rhythmic patterns.
3. **Important Point:** *Do not be rigid with rhythmic style.* Students may add an interesting and complex rhythms to go along with the performance. Encourage them to create rhythmic parts that fit with the style, and also be accepting if the classroom performance becomes more reflective of the student's musical experience.

Teacher Reference Sheet 3: Creating the Performance

1. For the classroom performance, there are three groups of students.
 - Soloist** – Improvises a solo in 4 bars. Students take turns as the soloist.
 - Orchestra Section** – Responds to soloist with four bar student composed melodies.
 - Percussion Section** – Play a subdued rhythmic ostinato to support the soloist and orchestra interplay.
2. When organizing the classroom performance, make sure the students are comfortable performing the orchestral responses. Start with 1 simple one, then the students can compose more when they get comfortable playing together.
 - a. Teacher separates the orchestra and percussion groups.
 1. Orchestra group can be 2/3 of the class.
 2. Student that are more comfortable with the melodic playing can be put next to students who aren't as comfortable.
 3. The percussion players can be students who aren't as comfortable on instruments. They can also switch out with orchestral players so every student gets a chance to perform.
 - b. Orchestral groups should be ready to do the chosen responses.
 1. It's okay to compose them the day of the performance, or use the student compositions from the past.
 2. It can be helpful to decide in advance which responses

3. **Important Point:** *The structure is important.* Soloists should be selected and given an order of performance that makes them feel comfortable.

Teacher Reference Sheet 4: Podcast

1. Using a phone or online voice recorder, students can create sound bites comparing their own musical influences with Umm Kulthum. They can read the answers from Student Worksheet 1 and can add them to a Podcast file that includes the student performance recording.
2. Students can create a script using these instructions from Scott Watson's 2011 book "Using Technology to Unlock Creativity in the Music Classroom"

“Crafting a Script: Finished podcasts will be between 1:30 and 2:00 in length, so scripts need only be 100 to 300 words (300 words is about two minutes of nonstop narration). The script should be built around three brief (30-second) sound clips of the music students will share (see below). Students should do some research on their topic using websites such as allmusic.com or Wikipedia, typing their scrip with a text editor. Caution students not to get bogged down with a lengthy, detailed report-that is not the purpose of this project. The goal is to tell a story that communicates their enthusiasm for the topic. After hearing the podcast, the class should share one another's appreciation for each student's "favorite" musical thing. Students may use the following outline for their script but may vary this structure to suit their topic.

Introduction: Why should the audience be interested in this topic? For what is your subject best known?

Background/Description: How did they get their start? What defies their achievement in music? Describe the premise of your topic.

Representative work: Tell us about some good examples that tell the story of your topic. Tell us why you like the music of your subject.

Wrap-up/Conclusion: Find an interesting and satisfying way to conclude, for example, what was your subject's contributing to music? What is your subject doing now? Is there a musical or life lesson that emerges?"

(Watson, 2011)

3. After writing a script, students will need time and space to record. This could be over a small number of class periods. The details of the recording will be up to your classroom situation. Very little technology is needed. If possible, allow the students to have as much say in the actual recording and editing of the podcast.

