

A person in a kayak is visible on the right side of the image, paddling on a calm body of water. The background features steep, forested mountains under a cloudy sky. The water reflects the surrounding landscape.

***‘Can you tell a green field  
from a cold steel rail?’<sup>13</sup>***

**– The relationship between  
Music and Outdoor  
Education**

**by Graham French**



I'm not sure how many would be able to identify the song from the lyric which forms the title of this article, but I suspect there are few of us who have not heard the title song from Rogers and Hammerstein's 1959 musical 'The Sound of Music'. How true is the sentiment expressed in the song in our modern world? Do we engage musically with the outdoors, or is it simply an arena for adventurous or environmental activities? In our efforts to develop a sense of place, do we include music as a cultural, place-centred aspect of outdoor education?

These questions have been with me for some time, and as an outdoor educator and amateur musician, I have put together some ideas around music and the outdoors, with the hope that this may prompt a greater musical appreciation in outdoor learning.

Music is important to young people. This is not only evident from observing how many young people listen to music, but also from studies in the US<sup>1</sup> and in the UK<sup>7</sup> that have concurred. The UK study found that 70% of adolescents surveyed either played or had played a musical instrument, and 76% listened to music on most days (and some even more than once per day). The UK study<sup>7</sup> into the importance of music to teenagers found that although music is important to many (as shown above), formal education (school) plays only a small part in this and if anything children dislike and disengage with music at school<sup>11</sup>. Most children's post-primary school experiences of music that are positive, stem from informal and peer influenced experiences. Whilst the challenge of re-connecting children with music in school lies predominantly with music teachers, I see a distinct parallel with the development of outdoor education – an informal, peer driven educative process, which is drawn towards formal education but doesn't necessarily fit.



How many of us find children 'plugged in' to an iPod/phone when they are/should be engaged in an outdoor activity? I would suggest that we mostly ask children to remove headphones, primarily for health and safety reasons (hearing instructions etc.) but to some, music (specifically non-classical music) in the outdoors is an anathema. It is felt that the practice of listening to modern music in the outdoors will somehow detract from the outdoor experience.

Music has long been seen as being important in the social and emotional development of young people, and this is acknowledged in curriculum documents relating to the teaching of music in schools<sup>9</sup>. In a similar way, outdoor education has long had an association with social development<sup>4</sup>, yet there is little evidence of the combination of music in outdoor education to further these shared aims.

There is an irony in ignoring the benefit of music in outdoor education, which stems from a struggle between modernism and romanticism. Today, modern music is shaped by urban culture, which has spawned a wealth of urban music genres, such as hip-hop, grunge, emo, garage and soul. Yet two centuries ago, those composers who we now group as classical, were at the forefront of musical development in style. In particular the Romantic Movement sought to re-connect rural roots with a population that was migrating to urban areas during the industrial revolution<sup>10</sup>. There was a need to give people a method to stay in touch with the open spaces, the wild places and the emotions, feelings and spiritual connection these facilitated. Music and art provided this conduit, and much classical music that is popular today stems from this period.

With its urban roots, how can modern music bridge this gap between the wild places and associated feelings and the majority of the population who live in urban or sub-urban surroundings? Do outdoor experiences that deny the intrusion of music widen this gap, or is there an opportunity to re-connect a modern world with a modern wilderness experience through modern music? I want to suggest that there are ways in which this can be achieved, most of which don't involve much, if any, musical training or ability.

Music is, and often has been, a source of cultural identity, particularly for cultures that are in a minority or are struggling against political oppression or social breakdown. Much history is preserved through music and song that can surpass documented or prose based accounts. Think of the Viking sagas, Welsh folk songs or sea shanties, and most people will be able to conjure an image of those cultures that would be hard to do so succinctly in words.

As we strive to connect our groups with the places in which we deliver learning activities, one aspect of a place, is the people who have lived there and developed a culture. In their book 'Pedagogy of Place,' Mike Brown and Brian Wattchow<sup>14</sup> use Aboriginal and Maori stories, art and people to help their groups gain a better sense of place, and to gain a deeper understanding of the environment and humanity's interaction. A connection with the people, culture, and hence place can be engendered by engaging with the music of that culture.

Where I live and work in Wales, teachers are encouraged to teach various aspects of the formal curriculum with a local cultural relevance (formalised as the Cwricwlwm Cymreig). A way to start this process is to examine a local folk song and visit the places it portrays, along with a look at the people in the song, and the feelings of the songwriter. This can then expand to incorporate many other aspects of the curriculum, but still grounded in that growing understanding of the cultural context, gained through the initial exposure to the music of that culture. It is also possible to visit a place to take part in a particular activity, and enhance the activity by experiencing aspects of the local culture such as folk stories and songs.

Music is still very important in many cultures, and as such has different value in curriculum as well as informal activities. In Wales this is formalised through a competitive festival, an eisteddfod, involving competition in music, poetry, literature and song. For some cultures music demonstrates a historical foundation for the activities and represents continuum of social development over time. In the Czech Republic this is entwined with the development of outdoor education<sup>6</sup> and it is impossible to separate the activities of a Czech based outdoor education programme from the cultural, artistic and musical traditions it follows.

So having established that music is important to young people, is a factor in social development, and can help establish a connection with a local area in place-centred learning, what can we do in outdoor learning sessions to embrace this?

1. Find out about the historical and musical background to the places you use for activities. An example local to me is a crag known as Union rock. It would be possible to take a group climbing there and for them to have a good time climbing, and return home. It would also be possible for them to be told the story as to why it is called Union rock (it was the site of a meeting of slate workers as they formed a union to argue for better working conditions), and they could learn one of the workers songs to further deepen their understanding of the history and the people of the area in which they climbed.
2. Use music in your review – either allowing the group to write a song, or if you or the group are not so confident, re-write a well-known song with words that reflect the experiences they have engaged in. A long standing tradition in a youth sailing project I have been involved with, is to for each crew to sing shanties every evening, to communicate the highs and lows of the day to the other boats on the cruise.
3. Another use in review is to allow groups to add a soundtrack (either sung or recorded) to any review film/drama they create. You could even suggest modern music that specifically relates to the outdoors (for example Rush Sturges' 'Who Am I?' available free at <http://www.fishmunga.com/partners/soundtracks/>)
- 4 Making music as part of the session – as demonstrated in several activities in the Environmental learning cards (cards CS23, 24 and 25). Here music, art and literature have an environmental context and are used as a vehicle to allow access to a different aspect of environmental awareness.
5. It is possible to replicate some cultural practices that involve music – for instance story telling with a drum and sung stanzas amongst spoken poetry retelling folk tales. Beware, however, of expropriating some folk practices that involve music (such as rites of passage), as out of context these can do more harm than good in terms of cultural education and connection<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, to encourage those who may not consider themselves musical, it has been suggested that music can be looked at holistically, to include the actions, feelings and thoughts invoked by a particular piece<sup>2</sup>. You don't have to be musically talented to develop musical/rhythmic intelligence. It's more important to know how to use music to put ourselves and groups into different states to deal creatively with different situations<sup>12</sup>, and if we can do this, music will add another dimension to our understanding of communities and local environmental issues<sup>3</sup>. If we follow the principal espoused by David Orr<sup>8</sup> that we will not save what we do not care about, then music opens the possibility of an emotional connection with the environment that is not always forged through solely being in the outdoors. ■

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