

Soundscape Composition Through the Medicine Wheel

A music composition lesson (instrumental or vocal) connecting aboriginal/indigenous people to the contemporary environment of students and their sense of place and empathy

Set up class in a circle, with or without chairs. Outside is preferable but inside will work as well. Use the following script to introduce the medicine wheel:

The Circle

The circle is a symbol that exists on all continents. No one knows when the first people began to honour the circle. The circle represents different teachings to the many people and nations of the world. The First Nations, Métis and Inuit people of Turtle Island, North America, have their own view of the circle. This lesson cannot provide every Nations' beliefs and knowledge, however, can provide a glimpse of how Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island's Anishinaabe view the circle or the wheel. We recommend sitting with traditional teachers to learn more about the circle, the Medicine Wheel, and yourself.

The circle is a part of the natural order of creation, addressing the water cycle, the seasons and the cycle of birth and death. The circle can signify completeness and creativity. All parts of the circle are infinite and continuous. They illustrate the interrelatedness that characterizes Aboriginal worldviews. They also illustrate relationships between various aspects of the world and human life.

Ask group the following questions and lead a discussion:

Has anyone already learned about the medicine wheel? (*share*)

What is something that you see every day that is a circle? (sun, moon, wheels, etc.)

The Medicine Wheel

The Medicine Wheel can represent many aspects to many Aboriginal nations in North America. It can represent the sacred hoop that we are all a part of. It acknowledges the relationships of all things both seen and unseen, this reality and the metaphysical. Our lives are filled with many beginnings and endings; sunrise to sunset, birth to death, and also with emotional reactions that lead to chosen responses.

The Medicine Wheel represents relationships between aspects of the self, the world, and all life. Examples of these include the four cardinal directions, four seasons, four elements, four stages of life, and four aspects of self. The Medicine Wheel can assist people to understand balance, responsibilities to self, family, community, nation, and the world in which they live in. It is about how each individual will choose to use their gifts to play a role in their community. The journey in life is to learn from each cycle.

In reality the past, present and future are all connected. The medicine wheel represents constant movement through each cycle, which can lead to a greater understanding and critical reflection.

Ask students to face the east then speak the following slowly:

We begin in the **East**. In the east is spring, sunrise, birth/infancy, and the spiritual aspect of self, the spirit. What are some of the sounds you hear at sunrise?

(Let students imagine this time of day in their current location. Ask them what they "hear," then pick one favourite sound and ask the class to imitate it, e.g., birds, slow traffic, alarm. Try to get as close to the actual sound as possible.)

Ask students to face the south:

The **South** represents the summer, the sun at high noon when there is no shadow, the hottest part of the day, youth, and the mental aspect of self, the mind and thoughts. What are some of the sounds you hear at midday?

(Let students imagine this time of day. Ask them what they "hear," then pick one favourite sound and ask the class to imitate it, e.g., faster traffic, people shouting, horns honking. Try to get as close to the actual sound as possible.)

Ask students to face the west:

In the **West** is autumn, sunset, adulthood, and the physical aspect of self, the body. What are some of the sounds you hear at sunset?

(Let students imagine this time of day. Ask them what they "hear," then pick one favourite sound and ask the class to imitate it, e.g., rush-hour ending, birds, people going home. Try to get as close to the actual sound as possible.)

After some time, ask students to face the north:

The **North** is winter, renewal, elder/senior, time of healing and the emotional aspect of self, the heart. What are some of the sounds you hear at nighttime?

(Let students imagine this time of day. Ask them what they "hear," then pick one favourite sound and ask the class to imitate it, e.g., distant traffic, sleeping sounds. Try to get as close to the actual sound as possible.)

Group Soundscape Composition

(Teachers may use this as a script, and do this section with voices.)

1. What are our four favourite sounds?
2. Let's create a soundscape piece that shifts through those four sounds.
3. How can we shift these sounds into one another to exaggerate or anticipate the next direction? (faster, slower, quieter, longer, shorter, higher, lower, quick stops, phase shifting)
4. Let's perform it. (Teachers can revise and try again with students.)

Journaling

Distribute the medicine wheel handout and have a discussion with the class about the aspects of each quadrant, along with the characteristics and feelings associated with each direction. Ask students to spend some time listening in each direction and journaling using the questions, which can be reproduced on the back of the handout.

While answering the following questions, keep recalling the aspects, stages, and characteristics of each direction.

What are some of the closest and farthest-away the sounds you hear?

Do any of these fit with the direction you are facing?

What are some of the closest and farthest-away things you see?

Do any of these fit with the direction you are facing?

Think about what is farther away from you, toward the farther-away parts of the city.

What are the sounds you would hear there? What are the things you would see?

How do these relate to the characteristics of this direction?

Think even farther away from you, toward other parts of the province and country.

What are the sounds you might hear there? What are the things you might see?

How do these relate to the characteristics of this direction?

Composing in Four Groups

(Can use instruments)

Ask students to pick a direction they feel best suits them at this moment. It doesn't have to be in relation to their age; it can be the characteristics associated with that direction. Encourage at least two or three students to be in each direction.

Give students the following assignment.

1. In your groups (directions), share some of your answers to the journaling questions.
2. Using the things you heard and seen create a short (1-2 minute) composition for your chosen direction.
3. Ask yourself: How will the beginning emerge out of the direction before it? How will it flow, anticipate, predict the direction after?
4. Practice, revise, edit, and prepare your piece.

Have students perform their sections one after another, starting with the east and proceeding to the south, west, and north. Discuss/revise the transitions and try again, making sure to leave a quiet space before and after.

Final Reflection

(Ask students to pair with a partner first, then gather them again in the large group.)

Think about the following.

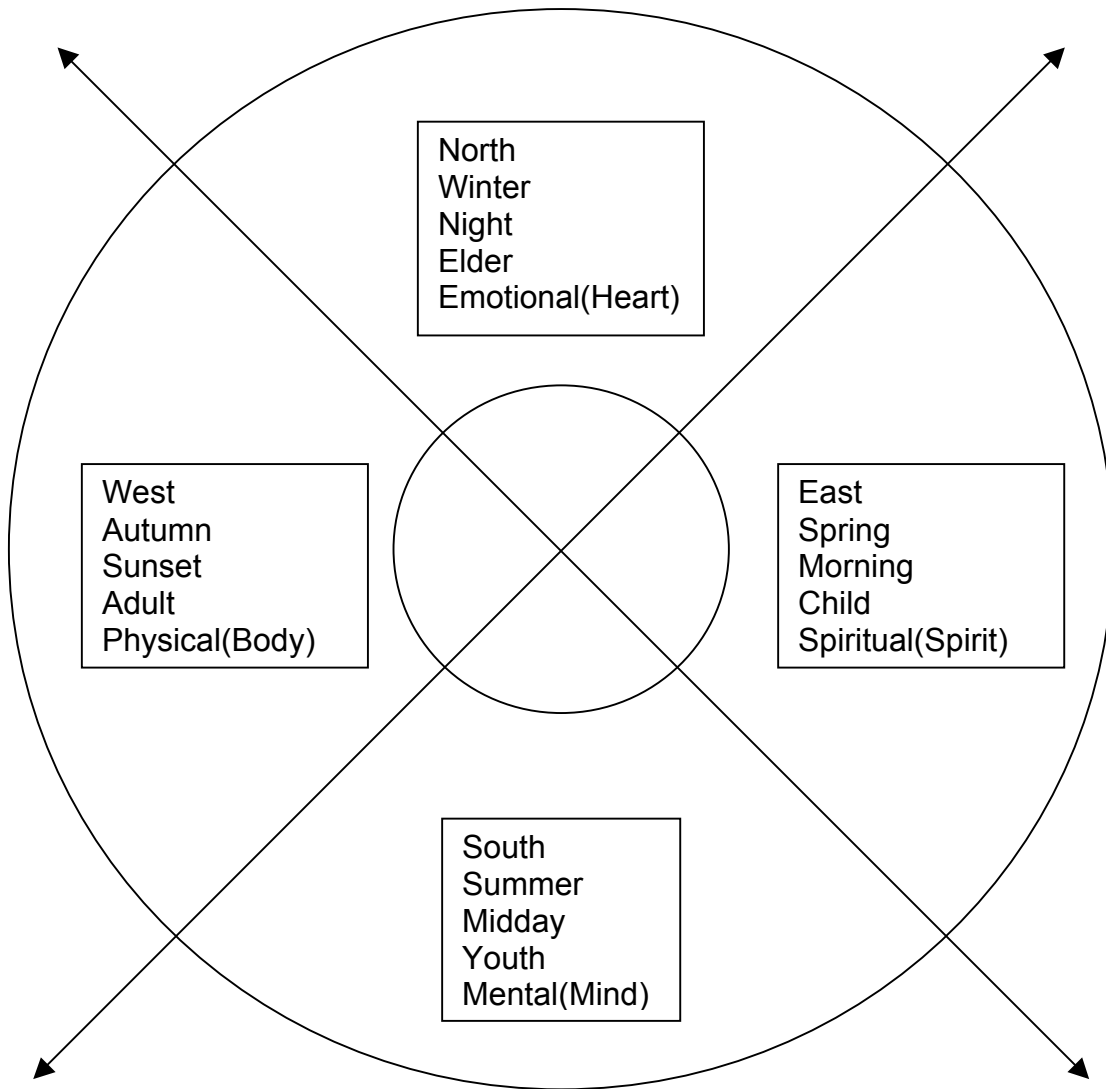
1. How was each direction depicted in our composition?
2. How does the Medicine Wheel help us understand our surroundings? The four directions? The four seasons? The stages of life?
3. How can reflection in all parts of the medicine wheel help us feel balanced in ourselves and our surroundings?
4. The medicine wheel shows how everything in the world is interconnected to form a single whole. How does your composition express interconnectedness? How does it express balance between Earth and all of Creation?
5. How would you express your own worldview through music? How do artistic media create images and sounds that explain aspects of culture, values, beliefs, and attitudes?

Extensions

1. Research the land before Toronto was developed and compose a piece exploring these forgotten/silenced sounds and how they might contrast with the current soundscape.
2. Pick various locations to compose and perform music based on the medicine wheel (e.g., beach, park, street corner).

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Medicine Wheel



Journaling Questions (for each direction)

While answering the following questions keep recalling the aspects, stages, characteristics of each direction.

What are some of the closest and furthest sounds you can hear?

Do any of these fit with the direction you are facing?

What are some of the closest and furthest things you see?

Do any of these fit with the direction you are facing?

Think about further away from you, toward the further parts of the city.

What are the sounds you would hear there? What are the things you would see?

How do these relate to the characteristics of this direction?

Think even further away from you, toward other parts of the province and country.

What are the sounds you could hear there? What are the things you would see?

How do these relate to the characteristics of this direction?