

DISCOVER BLUEGRASS: Exploring American Roots Music

Unit 5: Singing in Bluegrass Music – How Does a Feeling Sound?

The human voice is capable of expressing an incredible range of sounds. Behind many sounds is the simple need to communicate, but behind the majority of them is the desire to convey how we feel. Sounds used to express emotion are common to all races and cultures. They are the backbone of vocal musical expression, and the sounds and emotion in bluegrass are a great example.

Typical standards addressed:

Sensory modalities
Using vocabulary
Oral interpretation and expression
Cross cultural connections

What you will need:

A container with 50 cards, one for each of the 50 feelings
Dictionaries

Procedure:

After an introduction that outlines how sounds convey feelings, and that such heart-felt sounds are shared across all cultures and generations, organize the learners into a game of “Fifty Feelings.”

To play “Fifty Feelings”:

- Using the list below or a similar one of your creation, write each feeling on a card and put it in a container.
- Divide the class into teams of three. Devise an impartial way to determine the order of turns.
- At the beginning of each round, all teams draw a feeling card and then have two minutes to come up with a vocal sound that conveys the feeling. Dictionaries should be available if a team is unfamiliar with the feeling term.
- When the two minutes is up, each team in turn presents their sound to the group. The team must perform the sound together as a trio, in something approximating harmony if possible. The group has two minutes to guess the feeling that is written on the card. The teams must convey vocal sounds only—no words, props or pantomimed hints. This may be difficult for some teams to control. The teacher will need to play it by ear

Play the game as long as seems appropriate, inserting whatever degree of competition seems right for the class (e.g., scoring, prizes).

After the game, process the experience with the learners, discussing such things as easy/hard feelings to convey through sound, how elements such as pitch, volume and repetition affect the feeling, and how unison and harmony amplify the emotion as well as volume.

Fifty Feelings

Nostalgia	Crazy	Despair	Joy	Dread
Fatigue	Confusion	Misery	Love	Anger
Aggression	Relief	Grief	Guilt	Hope
Patriotism	Boredom	Stuck-up	Celebration	Fear
Bossy	Homesickness	Surprise	Busy	Dreaminess
Happiness	Shy	Stupidity	Pain	Dangerous
Upset	Pride	Eager	Panic	Creative
Silliness	Envy	Adventuresome	Laziness	Heartbreak
Sluggish	The Blues	Loneliness	Selfish	Coolness
Peacefulness	Defensive	Regret	Energized	Inspired

An assignment that emerges from this would be to have learners examine songs they know (e.g., popular songs, Christmas carols, nursery rhymes, camp songs) for sounds that convey feeling. Writing assignments or reports should capture the nature of the sound and how it seems to have the effect that it does.

If your class is a vocal music class (or if they are just interested in singing), you may want to try a simple bluegrass chorus in three part harmony—for example: “I’m Going Back to Old Kentucky,” the song The Chapmans sing in the film. Divide the class into three parts, depending on vocal range: baritone (low), lead (middle) and tenor (high). Baritone sung an octave higher is an option for young students. Have your lead, tenor and baritone vocalists sing along with The Chapmans on the film, as parts are added one by one. Then stop for a moment and discuss the feelings that are being conveyed in this song. For the final time through, ask the students to focus on these feelings while they sing the song in three-part harmony.

I’m Going Back To Old Kentucky (chorus)

by Bill Monroe

I’m goin’ back to old Kentucky,

There to see my Linda Lou.

I’m goin’ back to old Kentucky,

Where the skies are always blue.

Additional Lesson Ideas:

Examine sounds from the film, especially the “high, lonesome sound” that is so common. How is this “lonesome” sound made? Play examples from other kinds of music or recordings as well to analyze how, for instance, opera singers and auctioneers convey feeling through sound.

Talk about very special sounds, such as yodeling or whistling, that are feeling-packed, pure vocal sounds without words.

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