



BACKGROUND INFORMATION, USEFUL TERMS,  
RELATED RESOURCES, EXTENDED LEARNING ACTIVITIES



"THE RICHNESS OF AMERICAN MUSIC COMES FROM THE MIXING OF  
CULTURES AND TRADITIONS OF PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD."

— RHIANNON GIDDENS

# BACKGROUND CONTEXT: TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

*This information can be shared to frame the American Railroad project of Silkroad and My Music with Rhiannon Giddens.*



The much-lauded Transcontinental Railroad was a major train route that connected the eastern and western United States and was completed in 1869. This massive infrastructure project began during the Civil War in 1863 with support from President Abraham Lincoln, Congress, and private investors. Two major railroad companies undertook the construction: The Union Pacific Railroad, which built westward from the east, and The Central Pacific Railroad, which built eastward from the west. The two rail lines met at Promontory Summit, Utah, on May 10, 1869.

Central Pacific's workforce consisted predominantly of Chinese laborers, while Union Pacific relied heavily on Irish workers. African American workers also contributed to the railroad's construction, including formerly enslaved people who sought work in the West after emancipation.

Laborers faced harsh working conditions and unjust treatment, but the issues didn't stop there. The railroad's construction had devastating consequences for Indigenous peoples, whose lands were seized and built over without consent or compensation. The railroad also facilitated the near-extinction of buffalo herds, which were critical to many Indigenous nations' way of life.

While the Transcontinental Railroad was considered a great technological advance in the 19th century and shortened travel time across the country, the building of the railroad and the rapid expansion and development of the western United States that followed left countless people displaced, destroyed communities, and impacted labor movements for generations.



# **SILKROAD AND SEASON 2**

## ***MY MUSIC WITH RHIANNON GIDDENS***

Season two of My Music uses the American Transcontinental Railroad as the metaphor of a route rich with cultural influences and cross-cultural conversations among workers and communities affected by the construction.

---



The inspiration for Silkroad arose from my interest in the movement of people and goods, and the open exchange of ideas and traditions that took place along the ancient trade routes. My friends in the Silk Road Ensemble practice an openness that encourages the exchange of ideas.

The Silk Road is a metaphor for a number of things: as the Internet of antiquity, the trade routes were used for commerce by religious people, adventurers, scientists, and storytellers. — Yo-Yo Ma

# SEASON 2, EPISODE 1 - *MY MUSIC WITH RHIANNON GIDDENS*

Wu Man is a Grammy award-winning pipa virtuoso and ambassador of Chinese music. Her work strives to preserve and innovate pipa music through performance, education, and collaboration with musicians like Philip Glass and Kronos Quartet, as well as artists in other disciplines like dance and calligraphy.

A founding member of the Silkroad Project, Wu Man was the first Chinese musician to play at the White House and is a recipient of the prestigious National Endowment for the Arts, one of the United States' most prestigious honors in folk and traditional art.

---

## PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITY

*Give students an opportunity to reflect through pre-writing or pre-discussion about the role of music in their lives. Do they listen to music to study, relax, hang out with friends, or for special or religious occasions? Compile a list on the board capturing their various musical experiences.*

## ACTIVE VIEWING RECOMMENDATION

*Provide students with the **Listening Guide Handout** (available through Journeys in Film) or have them design their own. Have students fill in this grid for each musical piece performed in the episode.*

---

## USEFUL TERMS

- Aristocratic — Belonging to or having qualities of the aristocracy, or privileged class.
- Cantonese — A language spoken by 55 million people in China.
- Oral tradition — The practice of passing down a community's cultural and historical traditions through spoken words (oral sharing) or without written communication.
- Persia — Ancient Iran, a dominant nation in Western Asia for over twelve centuries that included, at various times, Egypt, Libya, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, part of Greece, and parts of India, as well as other surrounding areas.

# INSTRUMENTS & MUSICAL TERMS

- Banjo — A stringed instrument brought to the U.S. and developed by enslaved Africans in colonial North America and the Caribbean. The banjo and its early music blend African and European musical traditions, creating a uniquely American form.
- Chinese pentatonic — A musical scale of five notes consisting of C, D, E, G, A.
- Lute — A pear-shaped, wooden stringed instrument popularized in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. The instrument was influenced by Arab and Persian stringed instruments of similar shape and style.
- Oud — A pear-shaped wooden stringed instrument from the Middle East. The name comes from the Arabic word for “the wood.” This instrument is a forefather of the European lute and guitar.
- Pick — As a noun, a pick is a small piece of plastic or metal used to pluck or strum a stringed instrument. Traditionally, picks could be made of bone, shell, or similar material. As a verb, “to pick” describes the action of plucking a string on an instrument.
- Pipa — A pear-shaped wooden stringed instrument from China. The pipa is derived from the Persian lute and was introduced to China through the Silk Road.
- Plectrum — A tool used to pluck the strings of an instrument, similar to a pick.
- Yueqin — A Chinese stringed instrument popular in the 19th century. This rounded lute resembles the full moon, and that resemblance gave the instrument its name. (Moon = Yue)



# GUIDING QUESTION

*How are music and musical instruments transformed through human migration and cultural exchanges?*

---

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Rhiannon mentions that Wu Man has an “insatiable curiosity” and credits this trait as essential to her ability to collaborate with other musicians. Why might curiosity make it easier to collaborate with others? Why is curiosity a positive trait for a musician? In what other fields would curiosity be an asset?
- Compare the banjo and pipa. What are their similarities and differences? What is the result of the two stringed instruments, from such different geographical regions, being played together? How do the two instruments reflect the experience of musical expression and travel around the world?
- Wu Man mentions that one of her favorite songs is “White Snow in Sunny Spring.” How do titles in classical Chinese music differ from Western Classical music?
- When you first heard the pipa played, did it sound the way you expected? Did it remind you of any other instruments?
- Wu Man plays the song “White Snow in Sunny Spring” (at 9:14–12:58). The song has no lyrics. How does the music reflect the words of the title? What story do you think the music is trying to tell? How does the song build?
- How did the pipa develop and change over time? What might motivate changes in instruments over time?
- What story is the American Railroad musical project telling? How does that story relate to Wu Man? Even though her ancestors were not involved in building the Transcontinental Railroad, why was she compelled to engage and tell this story?



# RELATED RESOURCES

(All underlined resources are hyperlinks)

- American Railroad curriculum: Lesson 6: Chinese Immigrants —The Search for Gold Mountain and Lesson 9: Rock Springs Massacre (available through Journeys in Film)
- [Wu Man](#)
- [Silk Road Home Sessions with Wu Man](#) (YouTube video)
- [Introduction to the Pipa with Wu Man](#) (YouTube video)
- [Persia - The Getty](#)
- [Banjoes - Smithsonian Institute](#)
- [History of the Banjo - Bitter Southerner](#)
- [Chinese pentatonic scale](#) (YouTube video)
- [The Lute - Britannica](#)
- [The Mandolin - Britannica](#)
- [Yueqin - Met Museum](#)
- [History of Railroads and the Transcontinental Railroad - Library of Congress](#)
- [Railroads and the Making of Modern America](#)



# EXTENDED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

*These hands-on activities can be completed individually or in groups and extend learner engagement. They can be used with ANY episode from the series.*

- Explore world instruments as a class <https://www.youtube.com/globalmusicianworkshop>
- Silkroad - Make a Pipa (YouTube video)
- In groups, learners research various stringed instruments from around the world and map their evolution and journey. Consider making a bulletin board or display of the class's research. (Create a group Google Slides presentation of musical instruments. Assign students (or pairs of students) instruments to research. Their slide could include a clear image of the instrument, a historic image (from a tapestry, stone carving, painting, etc.), a brief history of the instrument, and a clip of the instrument being played.)
- Have learners complete the **Music Listening handout** from the Journeys in Film website for one of the songs from one of the episodes.
- Have learners analyze one of the songs in an episode using the **Analyze a Song handout** from the Journeys in Film website. They can share their analysis with the class or use the handout as a starting point for a presentation on the song they selected.
- Lead learners through a collaborative music session using only their voices and bodies (for percussive elements, which was seen in Pura Fé's performance). This works best if learners sit in a circle, facing out. In creating the music, learners can hum, whistle, clap, stomp, snap, sing, click, etc. Have the "performance" start with one student making a sound and then have others add on to that with an emphasis on using their best listening skills. After this activity is complete, learners can do a journal response related to the activity, reflecting on how the music changed, what they contributed, and what the collaborative process was like.
- Lead students through an active listening/slow looking experience. Have learners re-watch one of the musical performances from one of these episodes. This time, as they listen and watch, ask learners to take notes about what they hear in the performance and encourage them to pay close attention to the body language of the musicians. An alternative is to have learners draw, sketch, and color as they listen to the music and share their creations with the class.
- Replay the section in episode 2 where Maeve Gilchrist speaks about the "thin place." Have learners brainstorm "thin places" they have visited, know about, or can imagine. Write a journal entry, letter, poem, song lyrics, or short story (flash fiction) inspired by "the thin place."



# EXTENDED LEARNING ACTIVITIES CONT.

*These hands-on activities can be completed individually or in groups and extend learner engagement. They can be used with ANY episode from the series.*

- Have learners write a music review of one of the songs or create a podcast about one of the songs. The **Music Analysis handout** or **Music Listening handout** can be used as a prewriting activity for the music review. Stress that their review should mention musical style, techniques, performance qualities, as well as the historical and/or cultural relevance of the song. (Both handouts are available on the Journeys in Film website.)
- Explore rhythm as a class. Listen to Wynton Marsalis playing The Flight of the Bumblebee, which predominantly uses short rhythms. Then, listen to this B.B. King guitar solo, which contains many long rhythms.
- If you have learners in your classroom who are part of any musical performance groups (orchestra, jazz band, marching band, chorus, church choir, a rock band, etc.), organize them into groups of four. (Try to arrange each group with musicians from various types of musical experiences.) Conduct a panel discussion and Q&A session with each group of four, fielding questions about their music experiences from their peers.
- If your learners watched all four episodes, have them (in discussion or journal writing) reflect on the influence of family and environment on the musicians. Encourage them to compare and contrast the different upbringings and backgrounds of the featured musicians from each episode.
- Invite local traditional musicians to share their instruments and music with the class.
- Create a class playlist of traditional music to listen to during focused work time.
- Collaborate with the music department at your school, if possible, so that students can engage in an exploratory experience of different instruments.

**ADD MORE IDEAS IN THE BOX ABOVE!**

# ABOUT JOURNEYS IN FILM

Journeys in Film is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to the use of film to promote a richer understanding of our diverse and complex world.

---

## JOURNEYS IN FILM RESOURCES AND SERVICES

**We create educational resources** that spark community discussions and/or promote proactive learning for youth, parents, educators in K-12 and higher education, homeschoolers, and other learning communities. We also **create impact materials for libraries and community organizations.**

We leverage our established educational relationships to **promote materials in active outreach** to these audiences. We **extend the reach of a film and its lifespan** in the educational marketplace and beyond.

We work with a wide array of partners (non-profit organizations, educational institutions, educators, museums, teacher training institutes) to **develop resources tailored to the individuals and communities we work with and the audiences they seek to reach.**

**Our resources** focus on cultivating human empathy and compassion, developing a deeper knowledge of global issues and current challenges, and encouraging civic engagement.



**JOURNEYS IN FILM**  
educating for global understanding

[journeysinfilm.org](http://journeysinfilm.org)