



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 2 - *MY MUSIC WITH RHIANNON GIDDENS*

Silkroad Artistic Director and award-winning musician Rhiannon Giddens performs and talks with Celtic harpist Maeve Gilchrist in a historic North Carolina train station. Gilchrist composed an original piece for Silkroad Ensemble's American Railroad project.

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, Maeve Gilchrist is a premiere harpist and composer known for her innovation and for bringing the instrument to new audiences. She tours and performs as a solo artist, as well as with many acclaimed ensembles, including the Grammy-nominated Silkroad Ensemble, Arooj Aftab's Grammy-winning Vulture Prince Ensemble, and the multi-disciplinary quartet Edges of Light.

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

- Celtic — Ancient European people who are related to Irish, Scots, Welsh and Britons, or individuals speaking the Celtic language. Many people today in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales consider themselves to be Celtic.
- Convict labor — The act of “leasing” out as laborers men and women who were convicted of crimes. Often the state/government entity leased the individual out to various companies, such as large railroad companies. The state/government entity received the money paid by the company.
- Maternal line — Family lineage traced through the mother's ancestry.
- Standing Rock — Straddling the border of South Dakota and North Dakota, the Standing Rock Indian Reservation covers 2.3 million acres, stretching across endless prairie plains, rolling hills and buttes that border the Missouri River. Home to the Lakota and Dakota nations, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe is committed to protecting the language, culture, and well-being of its people through economic development, technology advancement, community engagement and education. Standing Rock is also a term used to reference protests of the Dakota access pipeline, which were led by many Indigenous nations, but which brought together people from throughout North America in opposition to the building of the pipeline. (<https://standingrock.org/>)

INSTRUMENTS & MUSICAL TERMS

- Bagpipe — A wind instrument associated with Scotland but believed to have originated in the Middle East. It is made of two or more single- or double-reeded pipes. The wind is set in motion by arm pressure on a bag (traditionally made of animal skin or animal stomach lining and today often made of rubberized cloth). The pipes are held in wooden sockets tied into the bag.
- Fiddle — A bowed, stringed instrument, originating in Europe in the Middle Ages, a forerunner to the violin which emerged in the 10th century, possibly derived from the lira, a Byzantine version of the rabāb, an Arabic bowed instrument. Today, the fiddle and the violin are technically the same instrument, but which word is used often depends on the musical style.
- Harp — A stringed instrument in which the resonator, or belly, is perpendicular, or nearly so, to the plane of the strings. Harps were widely used in the ancient Mediterranean and Middle East. Frame harps appeared in Europe in the 9th century, and their origin is unknown. They are particularly important in Celtic culture.
- Celtic harp — Also known as the Irish harp, this is the traditional harp of Ireland and Scotland characterized by a large sound box carved from a solid block of wood and whose strings are typically plucked by hand.
- Pedal Harp — A musical instrument in which pedals control a mechanism raising the pitch of given strings by a semitone (single action) or by both a semitone and a whole tone (double action). The modern double-action pedal harp, the standard orchestral harp, covers six and a half octaves (three below and three and a half above middle C).
- Composer — A person who composes (writes) music.
- Folk instrument — Instruments made and used by Indigenous people around the world; also defined as traditional music instruments still used for creating traditional music or folk music.
- Improvisation — Free performance of a musical passage or music created in a non-prescriptive manner, often based on a musical style or set of musical parameters (like a musical scale or key). Most often associated with jazz music, but also common in other musical genres and styles, especially traditional music and/or folk music.
- Jam sessions — A gathering of musicians to play music together, often in a non-formalized or experimental way.
- Jazz — This term was applied initially to music developed in New Orleans at the beginning of the 20th century. Jazz, originating in African-American communities, is a distinctly American musical style combining West African traditional and European symphonic music. Notable characteristics of jazz include improvised solo performances, call and response, and rhythms that “swing.”
- Orchestral — Of, relating to, or composed for an orchestra, or suggestive of an orchestra (defined as a group of musicians, especially stringed instrument players, coming together as a group to perform.)
- Ornamentation — In musical terms, music that includes embellishments or extra notes or variations on a set of notes.
- Traditional music — Songs or music that has been passed down through communal performance processes from generation to generation.

GUIDING QUESTION

What is the power and importance of music as a mode of self-expression and as a tool for cultural exchange?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does storytelling in the American Railroad project impact our knowledge of each other and history?
- How does Gilchrist describe the role and impact of traditional music in her family and community growing up?
- Compare improvisation in traditional Scottish and Irish folk music and American jazz.
- How is folk music a powerful unifier that strengthens cultural exchange and collaboration for musicians?
- What makes the harp so unique and special as an instrument? What role did harp players traditionally have in Ireland?
- How does Gilchrist describe the “thin place”? What would your interpretation of the “thin place” be?
- Giddens describes the musical collaborations in the project as “a conversation with different languages.” What does she mean? Can you think of other art forms or examples where this type of communication might be possible?
- Describe Gilchrist’s original composition created for the American Railroad project. How was it shaped by the project? Whose experiences does it honor?



RELATED RESOURCES

(All underlined resources are hyperlinks)

- American Railroad curriculum: Lesson 10: Paddy and the Pullmans (available through Journeys in Film)
- [Silkroad Home Sessions: Maeve Gilchrist](#) (YouTube video)
- [Short History of Irish Music – Liverpool Irish Festival](#)
- [Unexpected Connections: Latina](#) (Bagpipe and Mexican bassist performance from Silkroad – YouTube)
- [Bagpipe – Britannica](#)
- [Fiddle – Britannica](#)
- [Harp – Britannica](#)
- [Irish Harp – Britannica](#)
- [Pedal Harp – Britannica](#)
- [Design of the Harp](#)
- [Jazz – Smithsonian](#)
- [American History: What is Jazz? Smithsonian](#)
- [American Folk Music Instruments – Smithsonian](#)
- [Traditional and Ethnic Musical Styles – Library of Congress](#)
- [UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music](#)



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.



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