

A CLASSROOM CLOSEUP

by PAULA BAKER

"This is more than a class in Native American music," says Virginia Giglio, visiting assistant professor in the University of Oklahoma School of Music. "This is a class in being human . . . and in being humane."

Giglio illustrates her point when she plays a tape and explains that the singer's "laughing" sounds are actually sobs.

"This woman is singing her dead parents' love song as a mourning song," she tells a class of 50 students. "She has opened her heart to us because she knows this recording will be used in classrooms and museums. It takes a generous spirit to do this."

"You are on sacred ground."

Giglio is visibly moved as she empathizes with the singer. The students note her involvement with more understanding than might be expected of such a diverse group. They have participated in Giglio's class for most of a semester.

The students represent the diversity of a modern university. The Native Americans, Hispanics, African-Americans and Caucasians in the room sport trendy clothing from collegiate shops, fraternity and sorority sweatshirts and warm-ups with team insignias. Earrings are worn by both sexes, and ponytails by some of the men. A few of the faces would be recognized by OU football, baseball and golf fans.

"I cry because I am touched by the beauty of Native American music," Giglio explains. "I grieve that so many people before me have dismissed this music. I am humbled that I have had the opportunity to speak with those who carry on the traditions. I want people to know and love other people, and one way they can do that is through music. Music tells what people believe, what they live for and what they die for."

Giglio believes she brings special talents to the program she helped develop.

"I have an unusual appreciation of sounds," she says. "I can even enjoy a water sprinkler. I also have a good



Betsy Baker

The popularity of the class in Native American music is attributed by the students to the subject matter and the skill and dedication of its teacher, Virginia Giglio.

melodic memory for transcribing melodies."

She is also a flute player, a singer and the daughter of a jazz musician.

Giglio brings some of the latter background to her lectures, relating the vocables (meaningless sounds) of the heh-yeh-yeh of chants to scat singing. The pentatonic (five-note) scale common to much of the world's music is likened to the "five black piano notes" that are guides for musicians Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder.

The popularity of the Native American music course is demonstrated each semester when the class reaches its 50-member limit before senior enrollment is completed. The course fulfills one of the University's pioneering core curriculum requirements for study in non-Western culture.

The students in MUNM (music for non-majors) 3213 say the popularity of the course lies in the skill and dedication of the instructor as well as the subject matter. No one says it is easy.

"The class is different and interesting," says Kimberly Pendleton of Moore. "Dr. Giglio is so motivated that she motivates her students."

Pendleton, a history major, finished her degree courses in December and has begun work on certification as a secondary teacher. Her teaching will reflect the insights gained from the music class and her concurrent class in Native American non-fiction.

"It's exciting to see how these two courses fit together to give me another viewpoint," Pendleton says. "I grew up in Moore and Oklahoma City, but I never learned much history about Native Americans and their cultures before."

Another student who knew little about Native American culture before the class is John Boyle, a senior of Cherokee descent from Tulsa. Boyle, a pre-medicine major, is attending the University on an Indian Health Service scholarship. He is planning to incorporate his new knowledge into his eventual practice in an Indian hospital.

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Some Native American students, active in their own tribal activities, take the course to learn about other tribes' music and customs. The class surveys Native American music of North America, including Alaska. Students are exposed to representative genres and performance practices for the major culture groups. They learn listening skills and are introduced to contemporary popular songs and musicians as well as traditional styles.

Guest lecturers are used when available to introduce authenticity and living history into the classroom. Comanche code-talker Bill Karty of Moore, a World War II hero, described the Gourd Dance and its paraphernalia to the students.

"You never want to miss a class, because it's always so interesting," says Rita Chandler, a senior from Edmond.

"The students can't miss classes because there are no textbooks to fall back on," Giglio says. "The class depends on lectures, videos, tapes and handouts I prepare myself by digesting materials in scholarly journals."

Students learn Native American social dances such as the Indian two-step and round dance and attend Native American events. Papers are required, and Giglio is helpful in identifying events that fit the course requirements. Protocol reminders precede powwow attendance.

Students are told to dress modestly, be kind to elders and be helpful in setting up the facilities. They may dance, if invited, and should eat what they are given without taking more than they need. Small gestures are appreciated, even the contribution of a bag of potato chips. Courtesy, in the sense of "do unto others," is stressed.

Giglio gently teases OU football player Corey Wilson. The Richardson, Texas, sophomore had participated in a recent event with OU's Native American Student Association.

"Corey, you did the girls' Jingle Dress Dance," she says, "but they were too polite to tell you."

Some students learn the Gourd Dance, which is a

dance to set the spiritual atmosphere for a night's events. One group of students acquitted themselves so well they were dubbed the Sooner Gourd Dancers by the master of ceremonies and allowed to use his personal equipment. Permission was granted to videotape the event, and the resulting video was shown at the 1991 meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology.

Giglio sees herself as a "cultural mediator" who knows the questions people on the outside have about Native American music. A Georgia native, she experienced Native American music for the first time six years ago at a conference sponsored by the College Music Society. One of


the speakers was David McAllester, a world-renowned ethnomusicologist. When Giglio heard McAllester for the first time, she was a doctoral student in voice. The recipient of a prestigious Benton-Schmidt voice scholarship, she was performing in "Faust."

"I was looking for a dissertation topic when I fell in love with native American music and realized how few scholars were working in that area," Giglio says.

She changed her doctoral program from musical arts to music education and wrote a dissertation on "Oklahoma Cheyenne Women's Traditional Everyday Songs." The dissertation received one of the three outstanding dissertation prizes from the University in the spring of 1992. An appointment as a visiting assistant professor of music at OU followed in August 1992. Her dissertation, edited into book form, will be available from the OU Press in early 1994.

McAllester subsequently became one of Giglio's consultants and

lectured on the Norman campus as part of OU's Centennial Celebration. He was welcomed to the University with the first OU School of Music convocation featuring Native American music.

Having carved out an academic niche for Native American music at OU, Giglio is becoming nationally known as a scholar in this genre. But as she says about her class, hers is more than just a study of Native American music. It's a study "in being human . . . in being humane." 



Comanche Bill Karty, seated, World War II Native American code talker, is assisted by senior Bart Massey, a Choctaw, as he lectures on Gourd Dancing to Virginia Giglio's class.