Native Americans are North America’s original music-makers, and the musical tradition of this culture is robust, diverse, and full of beautiful sounds and stories. It is an evolving art form, encompassing traditions from the past and influences from today’s pop culture.

The most important thing to know about Native American music is that it is a living, growing art form. It is not a ‘thing’ in a museum; it is current, vital and diverse. There are more than 550 different tribal groups in the United States that reflect different traditions, customs and languages.

In this diversity we find a universal language. Native American music has fundamentals that we would all be familiar with: form, melody, rhythm, timbre and more. In addition, Native American instruments, while unique and specialised to their place and origin, are a part of recognised instrument families: percussion, woodwinds and strings.

I work for Music Workshop, a non-profit music education programme that recently created an online lesson on Native American traditional music. During this exciting project I learned a great deal about Native American culture and music, and teaching about cultures I was previously unfamiliar with.
FEATURE ▶ NATIVE AMERICAN MUSIC

How is Native American music unique?
Music is a window into other cultures that we all can understand. Exposure to new and different cultures breaks down barriers and stereotypes while promoting understanding. In learning about others, we learn about ourselves.

One defining aspect of Native American music is that it is amazingly emotional and complex. Native American music has always featured a strong emotional style and content. The music frequently tells stories, invokes spirits, remembers history or asks for specific things from its listeners.

Native American music has a defining influence on modern folk music. It is also often complex and diverse. The sounds, beats, styles and keys of the music vary by tribe, nation and region. In many regions, nuanced vocals are combined with varying drumbeats to create an intricate musical tradition.

How can Native American music be presented in an educational setting?
I turned to Sarah Pierce, senior advisor of Indian education for Education Northwest (http://educationnorthwest.org), an accomplished lesson and curriculum writer, and a National Board-certified educator. She told me: ‘When including teaching about Native American music, I believe there are a few key considerations. Firstly, Tribal Nations are all unique and music is a part of that unique culture. The differences in drum materials, how they are created, how they are used and the songs produced are all unique, so be cognisant of the idea that how music is created and what it means can vary widely between not just Tribal Nations but also individuals.

Secondly, Native American music is more than drums and flutes. Hip-hop from [musical artist] Supaman infuses powerful prayer and looping techniques in spoken-word melodies. A Tribe Called Red connects traditional techniques and EDM [electronic dance music] through what is called ‘electric powwow’. If educators and students know that music is uniquely made and there is not a pan-Native view, or only music since and content. The music frequently tells stories, invokes spirits, remembers history or asks for specific things from its listeners.

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Suggested activities for the classroom
The Native American Music Awards website (www.nativeamericanmusicawards.com) has videos and links to Native American music and performers of all kinds.

I would suggest a search of the website and play all the songs,’ Pierce advises. ‘See what connects with you, see what connects with the kids, see what connects with what is being taught.

Full of big sounds, handmade instruments and amazing musicians, Native American traditional music is used in ceremonies, storytelling, healing and more. Music Workshop’s free resource ‘Native American Traditional Music’ (www.musicworkshoppedu.org) offers students the opportunity to experience many different Native American instruments like drums, rattles, rasps, flutes and vocals, plus exciting introductions to cultural events like powwows.

Another place to start is the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian (www.americanindian.si.edu). Unfortunately, the site doesn’t feature any lessons specifically on music, but it holds a wealth of general Native American information.

Many US states have Native American resources online, and they are a wonderful place to find lessons and information. Montana has a very robust curriculum (http://opi.mt.gov/Educators/Teaching-Learning/Indian-Education-for-All/Indian-Education-Classroom-Resources). Wisconsin’s state resources (www.wisconsinfirstnations.org) are also informative.

As Pierce mentions, Supaman is a performer who mixes traditional music with hip-hop and rap. Check out his videos (www.supamanhiphop.net); they are beyond beautiful. A Tribe Called Red (http://atribecalledred.com) is also a great example of how modern Native American music is growing and evolving.

Respecting Native American Culture
Naturally, as educators we all want to be respectful, thoughtful and accurate. Cornel Pewewardy (Comanche-Kiowa), one of the advisers for our ‘Native American Traditional Music’ course, has some great advice: ‘Be very cautious when teaching children about song and dance. Singing or dancing “Indian style” and “having a powwow” to many children today is “cool”. Many traditional people do not see their tribal cultures as cool. It is traditional and should be treated with respect and honour. Children should not dance Hollywood Indian-style, nor should children beat on a drum and try to sing traditional songs. Social and traditional songs and dances have religious meaning for many tribes, and any attempt at imitation is ridicule. The ability to beat on the drum and sing songs is earned through tribal rites of passages.’ (Excerpt from ‘Fluff and Feathers: Treatment of American Indians in the Literature and the Classroom’ by Cornel Pewewardy, in Equity & Excellence in Education, April 1998.)

I hope you strive to find out more about Native American music and traditions to share with your students. It is a rich and beautiful culture with so much to offer to us all. MT