

## Los Cenzontles Study Guide

We are excited about the upcoming performance for your students! The following packet is a Study Guide that we hope you will find helpful to prepare your students for our program. Below, we have included brief background information that can be used to introduce “Los Cenzontles” (The Mockingbirds) to your students.

### How to Use the Study Guide:

The lessons included in this Study Guide are intended to be suggestions for ways to tie The Performing Arts Standards and students’ personal experience to our music, therefore providing your students an experience for that is deep and meaningful. Although we have divided the lessons by grade level, most of the lessons can be adapted to be used for any grade.

### Who We Are:

*Cenzontle* is Nahuatl, the Aztec language, word for mockingbird—the bird of 400 voices. Los Cenzontles play a variety of regional styles of Mexican music, representing the diversity of traditional Mexican culture.

We began as a children’s group in 1989. The goal was to create a family-like environment to explore different styles of Mexican music and dance. We traveled to rural Mexico on a number of occasions to participate in music and dance camps. We wanted to learn about the cultures where the music came from. We have recorded 15 CDs, including the children’s CD *Papa’s Dream*, with Los Lobos that was nominated for a Grammy Award.

### What We Represent:

Mexico is a large country with many regions, most of which have distinct cultural characteristics due to the influence of various cultural forces. Before the arrival of Spaniards in the early 1500’s, diverse Indigenous cultures existed throughout Mexico. The arrival of the Spaniards introduced *mestizaje*—the mixing of races. In years following, people from all over the world, including Africans, Asians and other Europeans came to Mexico adding to the complexity of race and culture. As a result, each region in Mexico has its own food specialties, traditional dress and music, as well as unique dance and art forms.

The music of Los Cenzontles is largely *mestizo* music and rooted in Mexico’s rich rural cultures. Like the rich roots music of the United States, Mexico’s traditions come from rural areas. String instruments were introduced to Mexico by the Europeans. These include the violin, harp and various guitars from the Baroque and Renaissance eras. The ancient guitars were then adapted by the various regions to become the instruments we know today. Each of these instruments developed in its regional environment and has a distinctive sound that is tailor made for the regional music that it plays. We use a variety of these instruments in our performance.

### Why It Is Important:

Music still binds communities. Popular music changes year-to year, sometimes month-to-month. But traditional music often lasts for decades and centuries. It changes, but the process is slow, allowing people to reflect on themselves and their connection to their parents, grandparents and beyond. It gives us a full idea of how our ancestors lived. Knowing and understanding where we come from helps us move toward the future.

### Grade 3: Integration of Environmental Sounds with Music

#### **Performing Arts Standards:**

**4.3** Describe how specific musical elements communicate particular ideas or moods in music.

#### **Goals & Objectives:**

- ✓ For students to become aware of the environment as a use for artistic inspiration.



**Background:** Folk music of Mexico often incorporates natural elements of the environment into its songs. For example, in some cases songs may use the natural imagery of animals, plants or places to convey an emotion. In other cases, the music may use a sound found in nature, such as the song of a bird.

**Introduction:** Discuss the background of this lesson with your students. Explain to the class that they will see Los Cenzontles perform a song named: El Guaco, a song from Jalisco, Mexico. Point out that during the performance, students will notice that the song starts out with the sound of a bird, which quickly becomes an integral part of the music. Inform the students that they will have a special opportunity to participate in a song with Los Cenzontles! Let them know that Los Cenzontles will invite them to integrate sounds into one of their songs. Tell the students that they, too, can use the environment to inspire their own creativity. Ask them to think about the sounds that they hear everyday. Can they think of a sound that would be interesting to use in a song?

**Implementation:** As a class, brainstorm a list of elements found in the environment that may be interesting to consider for the sounds that they make. Invite the class to make sounds for each item on the list. Next, narrow the list down to 3 sounds by asking students to vote for their favorite one. Once the 3 sounds have been decided, divide the class into 3 groups—one to represent each sound. Provide time for each group to practice making their sound loud, quiet, slow and fast.

**Reflection:** *Pre-performance:* Revisit the list of elements found in the environment that the class brainstormed. Ask students if they were surprised by how many different ideas were generated. What other ways might they use the list?

*Post-performance:* Discuss students' reactions to the performance by Los Cenzontles. What did they like? Why? Did they recognize the song that used the sound of the bird? What was it like to participate in the performance by using the sounds that they had practiced in class? How did using sounds from the environment affect the mood of the song?

## Grade 4: Make Your Own Instrument

### **Performing Arts Standards:**

- 1.5** Classify how a variety of instruments from diverse cultures produce sound.
- 5.1** Integrate several art disciplines (dance, music, theatre, or the visual arts) into a well-organized presentation or performance.



### **Goals & Objectives:**

- ✓ To familiarize students with a variety of instruments from Mexico, including information about what they are made of and how they produce sound.
- ✓ For students to think about different ways to produce sound in the instruments that they construct.

### **Background:**

The instruments that will be seen in the performance by Los Cenzontles are made of wood.

- The *vihuela* and the *guitarron* from the Western Mexican states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Colima and Michoacan.
- The *guitarra de son*, the *jarana* and the harp from Southern Veracruz in the Gulf of Mexico. The guitarra de son is played with a pick made of cow horn. The jarana is strummed with the finger nails.
- The *huapanguera* and the *jarana hausteca* from the Eastern Sierra Madre mountain range.

### **Vocabulary:**

Cenzontle: (sen-sont-less) the Nahuatl (the Aztec language) word for mockingbird.

Mestizo: A Mexican of mixed race (including African, Asian, and European).

**Materials:** *It is impossible to anticipate the materials for this lesson prior to its occurrence, but plan to definitely have the following available:*

Scissors

Tape (both clear and masking)

White Glue (as well as hot glue if possible)

**Introduction.** Discuss the background of this lesson with your students. Review the vocabulary. Talk about the various instruments that students will be seeing in the performance by Los Cenzontles and what those instruments are made of. Explain that historically, instruments have been made from natural objects that people have found in their immediate surroundings. List a few instruments on the board\* and ask the class to brainstorm what people might have used in the past to create these instruments.

As a group, the class should generate a materials list of natural objects and/or recycled materials that can be used to create their own version of one of the instruments listed.

**Implementation:** NOTE: Due to the nature of this project, it is most realistic that the construction of the instruments does not happen on the same day as the introduction. A lapse in time will allow for both the teacher as well as the students to collect the materials needed.

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\* It is important to suggest instruments that your students will be familiar with, i.e. the guitar or the drum.

As students are constructing their instruments, ask them how they plan to play their instruments. Encourage them to figure out how to make different sounds from the instrument that they are building.

Once all instruments are complete, provide time for students to share their instruments with the class. Each student should play the instrument for the group and describe how the sound is being produced.

**EXTENSION:** Organize a class jam session where students may play their instruments as a group to a familiar song.

**Reflection:** *Pre-performance:* Talk about the challenges that students faced while constructing their instruments. Is the finished product different from what they imagined? Ask students to share their responses to the instruments made by their peers. Do they notice any clever ideas? Compare the sounds made by the instruments.

*Post-performance:* Invite students to share their reactions to the performance. What did they notice about the instruments played by Los Cenzontles. Did anyone notice any unique sounds made by the instruments?



## Grade 5: Oral Tradition & Music

### **Performing Arts Standards:**

**3.1** Describe the social functions of a variety of musical forms from various cultures and time periods (e.g., folk songs, dances).

**5.1** Explain the role of music in community events.

### **Goals & Objectives:**

- ✓ For students to experience the translation of their history as it is told orally and then re-told by someone else.
- ✓ For students to understand how music can play a role in the oral tradition of storytelling.
- ✓ To begin to understand how music is used in various social contexts.



**Background:** Traditional Mexican music was intergenerational; often times children, parents, grandparents and friends all played and danced together. The words of the music reflected daily life—*corridos* were narrative ballads that often told stories of local heroes and villains.

### **Vocabulary:**

Corridos: narrative ballads.

**Introduction.** Discuss the background of this lesson with your students and review the vocabulary provided above. Ask students to talk about the role of music in their own family life. Does the whole family enjoy music on a regular basis? What social events are traditionally tied to music (i.e. weddings, birthday parties, graduations, funerals, etc.)? How is the music different for each event? What role does the narrative ballad play in these social contexts?

Explain that oral history can be carried on through songs/stories that are passed down from generation to generation. Assign students to go home and ask their parents (or guardian) about their own family history. Suggest that students find out detailed information such as big events or critical moments that may have shaped their family history. As an example, you may take this opportunity to share an interesting part of your own family's history.

**Implementation:** Ask students to share their family history in partners. Require each partner to ask questions to get as many details about the story from the storyteller. After everyone has shared, ask each student to think about the most interesting part of the story they heard from their partner. Next, ask each student to retell his or her partner's story by writing it in rhyming verse. (It is possible that the writing process may take more than one session to complete). Ask volunteers to read their pieces to the class.

**Reflection:** *Pre-performance:* Remind the students that the oral tradition has been a common way of passing on history from generation to generation in many cultures. Point out that in some instances, stories passed on in this way can become exaggerated or completely changed from its original content. Ask students to talk about what it felt like to hear someone else share their family history. Was it an accurate retelling? Did the person focus on something that they emphasized in the story—or did the person highlight a different part that interested them more? *Post-performance:* Ask students to share their reactions to the musical performance with the class. What stories did some of the songs tell?

## Grade 6: Creating Rhythms With Our Bodies

### **Performing Arts Standards:**

**3.3** Describe distinguishing characteristics of representative musical genres and styles from two or more cultures.

### **Goals & Objectives:**

- ✓ To broaden students' concept of a percussion instrument.
- ✓ For students to experience the skill required in using their body as an instrument.



### **Background:**

#### **Vocabulary:**

Tarima: A wooden dance platform.

Zapato: The Spanish word for shoe.

Zapateado: The word *zapateado* comes from the Spanish word *zapato*, or shoe. *Zapateado* is a style of dance from Western Mexico. The footwork in this dance involves stomping on a *tarima*, which creates a drum for the music and is therefore considered a percussion instrument.

Sones: Songs meant to accompany dancers who dance, one couple at a time—taking turns—on a *tarima*.

**Introduction.** Discuss the background of this lesson with your students and review the vocabulary provided above. Explain to the students that Los Cenzontles will perform *sones* that will be accompanied by *zapateado*. Ask students if they are familiar with any other style of dance that also uses the footwork as a percussion instrument (i.e. flamenco or tap dance). Talk about the skill that is involved in being able to not only dance, but to use the dance steps in a rhythmic fashion that adds an extra dimension to the music. Have students brainstorm some of the challenges that may be involved in this type of dance/percussion accompaniment.

**Implementation:** Challenge students to use stomping and clapping as a means to create their own rhythms. As a warm-up, suggest a stomp-clap pattern that the entire class can follow. Have them follow the pattern at a fast pace and then at a slow place. Discuss the difference in sound, in motion, and in sentiment. Now assign students to work in pairs to create their own stomp-clap rhythms. Provide the pairs ample time to practice. Invite volunteers to share their rhythms with the class. Ask the audience to listen and observe closely to see if there is an identifiable pattern that they can name.

**Reflection:** *Pre-performance:* Encourage students to talk about the difficulties that they faced when creating their own stomp-clap rhythms. Did working with a partner make the task more difficult? Why or why not? Ask students to think about other genres of music that they are familiar with. Inquire about the role that percussion plays in the music that comes to mind. How would the music they are familiar with change if the existing percussion instrument were replaced with stomping and/or clapping?

*Post-performance:* Allow time for students to share their reactions to the musical performance. What did students notice about the use of the *tarima*? Ask students to recall the difficulties that they faced when creating their own stomp-clap rhythms. Can they imagine what challenges the performers may have faced?