Portail de l'éducation de Historica Canada

Madame La Bolduc

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Madame La Bolduc biography from *The Canadians* series. It explores the personality and career of Mary Travers Bolduc, who was one of Québec's greatest singing sensations. She was one of the first recording artists to give the Québecois a sense of pride in their language.

Aims

With a variety of writing and role-playing activities, students will consider the accomplishments of La Bolduc. Students will reflect on her career within its historical context and they will assess her accomplishments in comparison to contemporary French Canadian singers.

Background

Born in Newport, a small fishing and lumbering town on the southern coast of the Gaspé Peninsula, Mary Travers came from a large family of English descent.

Although there was little or no musical tradition in her family, she learned to play the fiddle, the harmonica, the accordion, and the jew's-harp. At 13 she left home to work as a domestic in Montréal. In 1914 she married a tradesman, Édouard Bolduc, and together they had a large family. With the beginning of the Depression years, she turned to public musical performance as a means of augmenting the family's modest income.

Travers was first engaged as a fiddler for the musical show "Veillées du bon vieux temps" in 1927. Her recording career also began at this time, accompanying the singer Ovila Légaré. Travers was encouraged to sing for the first time for the musical review, and initial success led her to compose *La Cuisinière*. Though she was scarcely known, her recordings of *La Cuisinière* and *La Servante*, issued on 78-rpm discs by the Starr label, sold an unprecedented 12,000 copies in Québec. Within a short time she became known far and wide throughout the province, and was universally referred to as "La Bolduc."

During the 1930s, Travers recorded 85 of her songs for Starr. They were written in colloquial French and concerned mundane events, expressing the joys and miseries of the common people during those difficult times. Most of all, they made people laugh about the very things that were most distressing to them.

The evolution of the chanson in Québec was greatly influenced by La Bolduc, and her songs enjoy a special place in Québec's musical legacy. According to the Encyclopedia of Music in Canada (Toronto, 1992), "Though she has had many imitators, she has had no equals."

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Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

1. Using the student worksheet as a resource, create a timeline to illustrate the key events in La Bolduc's life from birth to death. Include nine key events or developments. In small groups of three or four, direct your students to choose three events that they think are turning points in Mary's life. Compare the events the students have selected and encourage them to discuss why different events are important to different people. Emphasize that there is more than one correct answer and that all answers need to be supported with facts and well-constructed arguments.

Have your students write a short list, description, or poem about one of the events of the timeline of Madame La Bolduc's life. Connect all the writings to create a timeline to be displayed in the classroom.

2. Have your students write an obituary column for Mary Travers Bolduc (For examples of obituaries, refer to your local newspaper or go to the Globe and Mail). Be sure to include the names of her survivors and important predecessors, highlights of her life, cause of death and any other important information. You might also want to include a photograph.

3. Madame La Bolduc was her own publicist and tour director. She would often send posters a month ahead for someone to distribute to general stores and parishes to advertise her concerts. Have your students create a poster advertising one of her concerts.

Lyrical Lessons

4. La Bolduc's lyrics spoke of the daily events of her life and of the news world around her. Have your students create a newspaper or newsletter from a period in La Bolduc's life using the lyrics from her songs and their imaginations as their only sources of information.

5. Play students one or two of La Bolduc's songs. In small groups of three or four, have students examine the lyrics to several of La Bolduc's songs. As a class, have them think of events in their daily lives that they could write about (brainstorm). In groups of three, have your students write their own "La Bolduc" style of song. They may use the same music, substituting their lyrics for hers or they may choose a new style of music for lyrics. Reassure them that this type of song writing was more like writing in a diary. This might make it easier for them to get started.

6. Madame La Bolduc wrote many songs in colloquial French expressing the joys and miseries of the common people. With a partner, compose a song which you think may express common feelings amongst your friends, family, religion, culture, or other social group.

7. As a continuation of the above assignment, memorize the composed song and create an in-class "coffee house" in which each group performs its song. This assignment can also be substituted with a recording studio scenario or a music video recording.

Student Role-play

8. A Heritage Hall of famous Canadians was constructed in Ottawa for the year 2000 to celebrate the achievement of important Canadians. Prepare a presentation with illustrations and quotes on behalf of Madame

Bolduc. Make a strong case for why she should be inducted into the Heritage Hall. Select a panel of five to six students to role play the Board of Directors of the Heritage Hall. They will make the decision whether Madame Bolduc should be included based on the presentations given.

The Board should include: a French Canadian, a Québecois, two English Canadians, an Aboriginal person, and another person of any descent. It is important to understand how the various backgrounds of Canadians cause them and of course us to have a different view or interpretations of our History. How will this affect the decision? The rest of the students should act as journalists who will report on this event and the decision of the Board.

9. The Juno Award Ceremony: That special time of year has arrived once again when famous Canadian musical performers gather for an evening of glamour and celebration of talent. This year a segment of the show will be dedicated to the commemoration of Madame La Bolduc. It is your groups' task to produce this segment explaining La Bolduc's special place in Québec's musical legacy. Be creative! You may use audio-visuals, costumes, props, etc.

10. Press Conference: Create a scenario in which Madame La Bolduc and her family are taking part in a press conference in Montréal after having sold an unprecedented 12,000 copies of the recordings La Cusiniere and La Servante.

Roles to be Played: Madame La Bolduc, Edouard Bolduc, An agent, 5-10 Bolduc children, 5-10 reporters, and any additional media roles. The reporters must prepare questions that they would like to ask both Madame La Bolduc and her family. The Bolducs and agent must be ready, based on the information studied, to respond accordingly. The

students may choose to videotape the conference.

Journalism

11. Madame La Bolduc will be coming to your village church to perform. Knowing that she is homesick, what can you do to make her feel welcome?

12. Pretend that you are Madame La Bolduc on a break from a performance on the road. Take this time to write a letter to your family telling them about your road trip.

13. You are a journalist for *La Presse,* one of Montréal's largest French newspapers. You have recently been given the chance to attend one on La Bolduc's performances in which her songs refer to very taboo subjects. Write a critical review of this performance in you newspaper column.

14. The beginning of the video makes a comparison between the singing careers of Madame La Bolduc and Celine Dion. Using the information given in the video, and other resources create a chart comparing the biographical information of these two artists. Compare their childhood experiences, education, families, personal qualities, careers, and contributions to French Canadians. (Celine Dion can be substituted for any other significant female French-Canadian performer.)

Resources

La Bolduc Worksheet

Heritage Minutes: La Bolduc

The Canadians: La Bolduc

Barbeau, Marius and Edward Sapir, *Folk songs of French Canada.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925.

Bealey, Margaret E, *French-Canadian folk-songs: a list of sources in the*

libraries of Toronto.

Bolduc, Madame, *Madame Bolduc: paroles et musique,* (comp. Lina Kemon avec la collaboration de Jean-Pierre Joyal) Montreal: Guerin, 1993.

Songs of old Canada. microform - trans. by William McLennan series: CIHM/ICMH microfiche no. 09642

Les 100 ans de Madame Bolduc vol.1 (compilation Montreal, Fonovox, 1994)

La Bolduc les Grands Succes (compilation, Merite, 1994)

Madame Bolduc - The Canadian Encyclopedia

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