



# BRINGING THE FRAN-COPHONE WORLD INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH ONLINE CONCERTS

In order to offer my undergraduate students authentic cultural experiences and increase their enthusiasm for France and the Francophone world, I consistently organize an outing to a concert or theater performance each semester. While these events require extensive planning and preparation, the intellectual and interpersonal benefits for students are plentiful. These extracurricular activities represent a unique opportunity for students to authentically engage with the language outside the classroom. Moreover, after these events students typically display greater curiosity and participation in the classroom. These highly enjoyable shared experiences increase the sense of community among students; having fun together while using the target language encourages invaluable social exchanges both during and after the outings. The importance of these cultural opportunities was highlighted when they were no longer possible in the early days of the pandemic.

The Covid-19 lockdown in spring 2020 brought about an abrupt transition to online teaching as well as an unprecedented crisis for performing artists who suffered staggering economic blows as venues were shuttered. When we were all confined, it appeared that these rich cultural experiences would not be feasible. However, the unsettling political situation following the death of George Floyd coupled with the troubling racial disparities that arose during the health crisis convinced me that it was more essential than ever to celebrate the diversity of the Francophone world and facilitate intercultural dialogue. Enthusiastic participation in communal reading projects in Renaissance studies such as Iowa City's 100 Days of Decameron or Carrie Klaus's 72 Days of Heptameron illustrated the immense potential for meaningful online exchanges. The success of these endeavors

compelled me to seek out innovative ways to offer students engaging cultural experiences during remote learning.

Prior to the pandemic, I was already familiar with Brice Kapel's work since he regularly travels from France for workshops and concerts at middle and high schools in New England. Brice is a Franco-Togolese composer, musician, and writer, who has extensive experience working with students of French in the United States. During the lockdown, he began to give online concerts followed by Q & A sessions on Zoom. I personally attended a virtual sing-a-long and was inspired to offer a similar experience to my students in Elementary and Intermediate French at MIT. For these particular events, Brice works closely with Karen Girondel, a highly experienced secondary French educator in the US. Karen is instrumental in helping with the logistics and communication leading up to the events. Prior to the concerts, Brice and Karen provide audio files and lyrics to all of Brice's songs. Brice has an extensive repertoire of music and teachers are encouraged to select songs that closely align with their instructional goals and the interests of their students. In order to familiarize my students with Brice's music before the concert, we listen to his compelling songs in class and discuss the lyrics in the weeks leading up to the event. During class time, I focus on the songs that will be performed during the concert, but I also provide students with lyrics and links to Brice's videos on YouTube so that they can explore additional songs independently. Giving the students multiple opportunities to engage with the music before the concerts inevitably results in greater engagement during the events. I also prepare several questions about Brice's life, his music, and Togolese culture. Students work together in groups as they consult Brice's website (<https://www.bricekapel.com>), discuss

their favorite songs, and delve into Togolese cultural materials. After listening to Brice's music and examining his biography, my students prepare thoughtful questions for the Q & A session that follows each concert. The questions of French I and II students typically involve particular songs, musical influences, and Togolese culture. My intermediate-level students often prepare questions about Brice's transition from Togo to France or offer reflections on connections between their experiences as international students in the United States with Brice's immigration to Europe (a large percentage of MIT students are from abroad). The day of the concert I provide students with a document with the lyrics of all the songs. This maximizes their engagement with the language and increases student participation; some students choose to sing along while others opt to read the lyrics during the performance. Brice typically does a live performance of about eight songs and takes time to introduce each song and engage with students throughout the concert. Following the performance, there is also a thirty-minute Q & A session. It is important to remind students to have their questions readily available; this undoubtedly helps them to feel more comfortable and leads to greater participation. The advance preparation of questions and Brice and Karen's extensive experience with students of French always make for a lively discussion. Another highly enriching element of Brice's musical repertoire is the window it provides into the linguistic diversity of the Francophone world. Along with his beautifully composed songs in French, he also sings in his mother tongue, Mina. It is invaluable for students to realize that Francophone countries are not monolingual, rather a multitude of other languages are woven into the rich cultural tapestry of le monde francophone. After the concert, we discuss and reflect on

the concert experience and the content of the discussion with Brice. It is useful to take notes during the Q & A session and then integrate these observations into the conversation. During distance learning, my students were highly enthusiastic about Brice's performance and discussions; some remarked that the event was a highlight of the semester. Their enthusiasm for the online concerts during remote instruction has compelled me to continue to invite Brice to do a concert via Zoom each semester even though we have transitioned back to the traditional classroom. My students always appreciate the experience and I see greater curiosity and confidence in class after the event.

As Brice's concert materials note, "Through his songs, you will hear the emotions of an immigrant child as he comes of age in his beloved new country, France, with nostalgia for his roots, as well as the sensitivities of a grown man with an overwhelming desire to share his story." Introducing students to Brice's compelling story and Francophone culture through song and dialogue has been both invaluable and enriching. My experiences with Brice's online concerts are but one example from an infinite range of exciting possibilities. While some might argue that technology can dehumanize, the opportunity we have as educators to invite musicians and artists from far-flung corners of the globe directly into our classrooms allows us to expose our students to diverse human experiences and to highlight that we are an interconnected global community.

### Tips for Successful Online Concerts

- Seek funding early and request support from multiple sources.
- Take time to reflect on your learning objectives and units in order to select music that aligns with your pedagogical goals.
- Schedule far enough in advance to have time to adequately prepare materials and students.
- It is necessary for the instructor to be familiar with the biography of the musician and all song lyrics to avoid any unexpected surprises.
- Meet with the artist to discuss the details of the concert. (Establish the date, time, and virtual platform. Share the link for the concert. Discuss songs and expectations)
- Prior to the concert, give students multiple opportunities to listen to the music both inside and outside of the classroom. This will enhance their language acquisition and they will enjoy the concert more if they are familiar with all of the songs.
- In class, students should explore the life and music of the artist. This will increase participation and lead to more thoughtful questions during the Q & A session.
- Touch base with the musician two to three days before the event to finalize specifics. I always send another email with the concert link a few days before concert.
- Take a few minutes to discuss your expectations with students the day before the concert.
- Remind students to have their questions readily available for the Q & A session.
- Provide students with a document with song lyrics the day of the concert.
- Meet online with the musician at least fifteen minutes before the concert to check sound. If possible, have tech support available for any unforeseen issues.
- After the event, send a thank you note to the musician.

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