

WAYS TO USE MUSIC TO STUDY LITERATURE

Skills and strategies under development

Language Arts

1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
5. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process
6. Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts
7. Uses general skills and strategies to understand a variety of informational texts
8. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

Music

7. Understands the relationship between music and history and culture

Arts and Communication

1. Understands the principles, processes and products associated with arts and communication media
2. Knows and applies appropriate criteria to arts and communication products
3. Uses critical and creative thinking in various arts and communication settings
4. Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication

Life Skills: Working With Others

1. Contributes to the overall effort of a group
4. Displays effective interpersonal communication skills

Overview

How can music help illuminate literature? And how can literature teach us about music? In this lesson, students read a review of a musical performance based on Plato's dialogues and then set a literary work they have studied to music in order to bring out or enhance its meaning.

Materials

Literary selections, as described below; music player and selections of music

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Section 1: In-class Activities

1. Warm-Up

Tell students to get into small groups, and give each group a copy of one of the following:

- A short excerpt from the literary work they are reading or recently read in class, like an important passage or the last page
- A poem that is thematically linked to what they are reading, like Shakespearean sonnets or famous monologues from Shakespearean or other plays
- The first page of a work you are about to introduce, like the opening of «A Tale of Two Cities» or the prologue from «Romeo and Juliet».

You might give all groups the same passage, or you might sprinkle various passages around the room, ensuring that at least two groups receive the same passage. In addition, assign each group a well-known and catchy tune, like «Mary Had a Little Lamb», «Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star» or «Jingle Bells». Make sure that these do not repeat.

Tell the groups to prepare to perform the literary excerpt to the tune they've been assigned. After a few minutes, have one student from each group read the excerpt aloud, and then have the entire group sing the assigned song.

After student performances, open discussion with the following questions:

- How did the music change how you read the excerpt?
- What aspects of the text changed as the music changed?
- Did anything surprise you as you listened?
- Did one tune «work» with the text better than another? If so, which one, and why?
- In what ways are music and literature alike?
- In what ways have you seen these two art forms paired before? Were these pairings effective? Why or why not?

2. Reading and discussion

In «Ah, to Hum a Few Bars of Plato», Vivien Schweitzer reviews the Met Chamber Ensemble's new production of Satie's symphonic drama «Socrate». Read the entire article with your class, using the questions below.

Ah, to Hum a Few Bars of Plato

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/02/arts/music/02met.html>

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

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Satie called his three-part «Socrate» a symphonic drama. The music is neither symphonic nor dramatic but a sparsely orchestrated, cantata-like setting of three excerpts from Plato's dialogues. It received a rare outing on Sunday afternoon at Zankel Hall, with James Levine conducting the Met Chamber Ensemble.

Devoid of the satire and wit often associated with Satie, «Socrate» (1918) features simple, repetitive rhythms and a transparent orchestral accompaniment for the graceful vocal lines, which are often delivered in a detached, recitative manner. Satie called the work a «return to classical simplicity with a modern sensibility».

The music barely hints at the drama of Plato's texts, which are sung in French. The first movement, «Portrait of Socrates», comes from «The Symposium»; the second, «The Banks of the Ilissus», is from «Phaedrus»; and the third, «Death of Socrates», is from «Phaedo».

The vocal soloists were excellent: the mezzo-soprano Tamara Mumford and the sopranos Emalie Savoy, Susanna Phillips and Erin Morley. As Phaedo, Ms. Morley was particularly distinctive in the long monologue about Socrates' death; she sang with poise and a silvery tone, the understated orchestral music and lilting vocal lines reflecting Socrates' calm and dignity.

Ms. Morley was also heard to fine effect in Webern's Four Songs (Op. 12), which opened the program, sensitively accompanied by Ken Noda.

The whirlwind of Pierre Boulez's visceral «Sur Incises», which concluded the evening, offered a vivid contrast to the mildly soporific «Socrate». Completed in 1998, the work is based on «Incises», a short virtuoso piano work Mr. Boulez had composed as a competition piece, and scored for an unusual lineup of three harpists, three pianists and three percussionists.

Mr. Levine led a virtuosic and exciting interpretation of the challenging score, in which crystalline layers of sound and precise rhythms emerge through the chaos of what Mr. Boulez calls «organized delirium». The composer gives listeners (and performers) a chance to catch their breath in the fleeting moments of calm that punctuate the kaleidoscopic cascades of sound.

Questions for discussion and reading comprehension:

- Why might a composer want to set a piece of literature, like excerpts from Plato's dialogues, to music?
- How does the reviewer think that Satie's «Socrate» measures up as a «symphonic drama»?

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- How does music reveal tone in Erin Morley’s performance of Plato’s long monologue about Socrates’ death?
- What can classical music add to a literary experience?
- Why does literature provide good fodder for operas, musicals and songs?

Section 2: Activities

Activity 1. Exploring Rhythm and Mood:

Use the warm-up as a jumping-off point to help students understand literary «sound» elements like rhythm, meter, tone and mood. After students reach an understanding of these terms, they find one or more pieces of music that they think fits the tone or mood of the literature they are currently studying. In class presentations, they choose one piece of music to play while they read aloud the corresponding excerpt, then explain their choice and how it reflects the mood of the text, considering how different instruments, musical dynamics, tempo and rhythm, and repeated musical motifs contribute to its tone and mood.

Activity 2. Writing Original Compositions:

Students set a snippet from the literature they are studying to their own original beat or tune. Rap works particularly well for this, particularly if the book is saturated in hip-hop culture, though students who are musically inclined might choose to compose an original piece of classical or instrumental music to accompany a part or parts of the text. In either case, encourage students to consider mood and tone and what they hope to reveal about the text through music. Students studying «The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn» might create rap songs that reflect the racial conflicts of the novel or compose music that reflects the contrasting worlds of the river and the shore.

Activity 3. Creating Soundtracks and Liner Notes:

Students consider iconic movie theme songs and soundtracks from films like «Star Wars», «Superman» and «Indiana Jones», and discuss the impact of that music on the film itself as well as on audiences and popular culture. They then choose a theme song for a character in the work they are reading and use it as an anchor tune for a book soundtrack of at least five songs. They might find musical styles contemporary to the time of the text (either when it was written or when it was set) or browse their own collections. In choosing songs, they should consider setting, theme, overall tone or mood and the main characters. They should also write liner notes that list the artists and song titles and explain how their selections reflect their interpretations.

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Activity 4. Reviewing Performances:

Many literary classics have inspired opera librettos, musical theater productions and even ballets, including «Moby Dick», «Hamlet» and American classics. As a class, watch a video, listen to an excerpt, or, if feasible, attend a live production of an opera or musical based on your reading. Afterward, students write reviews about how the music affected their experience of the text and about what was both gained and lost in «translation». For example, readers of «Othello» might watch the video or clip (Renee Fleming Sings «Ave Maria» from Verdi's Othello// <http://vodpod.com/watch/702594-renee-fleming-sings-ave-maria-from-verdis-otello>) of Verdi's «Othello».

Activity 5. Analyzing Music in a Text:

Many works of literature feature music in a major way. Tennessee Williams, for one, uses music and snippets from songs as a motif throughout «A Streetcar Named Desire» to reveal character and intensify theme. If this is the case, ask students to explore the role music plays in the novel or play you're studying. Students studying «Streetcar» might trace the use of the Varsouviana music and how it contributes to Blanche's character. Alternatively, they might watch the film version and write a review of how effectively they think Elia Kazan uses a particular kind of music to enhance theme and character.

Activity 6. Using Music as a Teaching Tool:

Since students often find music more accessible than literature, ask them to demonstrate their understanding of various literary movements or other difficult literary concepts, like irony, by using songs to help teach one another about them. In the grand tradition of «Schoolhouse Rock», students might come up with musical methods for teaching grammar and style concepts. Or they might explore the wiki site Use Your Allusion to find songs with literary references and choose selections to play in class, for discussion about how the material was interpreted and represented in music. (They might also add their own ideas to the wiki).

Section 3. Going Further

1). After students complete and share their work, they reflect on what they gained by pairing music with literature in this way. What can one teach us about the other? What new understandings have you arrived at about the text based on this activity?

And, why should English teachers get to have all the fun? Science and math teachers can use music and songwriting to help students understand and teach complex scientific and mathematical concepts. And history

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teachers can help students understand various decades by asking students to explore seminal songs and albums.

Section 4. The Following-Up Lesson

In this lesson, students explore the way poetry's unique rhythms can be further enhanced by musical accompaniment. By pairing selected music and poems, students discover new ways to listen, interpret and appreciate these art forms.

Objectives:

Students will:

1. Analyze the beat of a poem and illustrate it with musical instruments and noisemakers.
2. Explore the experience of listening to poetry and music at the same time by reading and discussing the article «A Breezy Exchange Between Old Friends (Jazz and Poetry)».
3. Research songs that can meaningfully accompany the rhythms and tones of selected poems.
4. Write essays explaining their respective poem-music pairings.

Resources / Materials:

- pens/pencils
- classroom board
- copies of the article «A Breezy Exchange Between Old Friends (Jazz and Poetry)», found online at http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/20080111friday.html (one per student)

A Breezy Exchange Between Old Friends (Jazz and Poetry)

By NATE CHINEN

«This is not an exercise in nostalgia, or giggling at the '50s », the poet Robert Pinsky said on taking the stage at the Jazz Standard on Tuesday night. Along with his colleague Charles Simic, the current poet laureate of the United States, Mr. Pinsky was taking part in a program billed as «Words and Music». And his disclaimer doubled as a pledge. «We hope the evening will not be about goatees and berets», Mr. Pinsky said, «but about art».

On that count the experiment in booking was a great success. Both distinguished writers came to the club not only with an aura of literary celebrity – Mr. Pinsky is a former United States poet laureate and no stranger to the spotlight – but also a healthy regard for jazz.

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Mr. Simic, who was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, recalled hearing Coleman Hawkins with Red Allen at the Metropole Cafe on his first night in the United States, in August 1954. («So my American experience started out on a high note», he said.) For his part Mr. Pinsky described himself as a frustrated saxophonist before reading his «Ginza Samba», which breathlessly invokes both the inventor of the instrument and the ancestral legacy of the Atlantic slave trade.

For that poem there was appropriate accompaniment: a samba, played by the evening's resident trio of Mike Mainieri on vibraphone, Lonnie Plaxico on bass and Andrew Cyrille on drums. Later Mr. Pinsky and Mr. Cyrille engaged in a back-and-forth exchange of pithy couplets and improvised percussive fills, and the premise, meant to suggest jazz's tradition of trading fours, worked with breezy charm.

But these were the only instances of poetry coming into direct contact with music, which meant there were some missed opportunities in the set. None was more obvious than «Crepuscle With Nellie», Mr. Simic's moody reverie on the subject of Thelonious Monk at the Five Spot. It could have easily been read in concert with the Monk ballad that shares its name; instead Mr. Simic went first, and the musicians followed (with «Round Midnight», a different Monk tune). It seemed at times as if the poets were so wary of Beat Generation trappings that they closed off any chance of alchemy with the music.

Then again the title of the engagement promised a meeting, not a melding, of practices. And in context, the format committed both poets to a sort of cutting session. Mr. Simic used much of his stage time to hint at a bygone New York bohemia, where jazz provided the soundtrack. He struck a sly and sensuous note with three short pieces in a row, beginning with «Unmade Beds». In another poem, «Shelley», he conjured an image of shadowy solitude along rainy city streets. (Mr. Mainieri could have amplified this feeling).

Mr. Pinsky read several striking recent poems, including «Samurai Song» and «Antique», studies in tension and opposition. He also touched upon his acclaimed translations of Dante Alighieri. And with «The Green Piano» he filtered personal history through the language of rhapsody. Though no exercise in nostalgia, it harnessed the power of memory. And it echoed an earlier observation by Mr. Pinsky: that jazz and poetry are «two profound arts that have to do profoundly with time».

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IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES / PROCEDURES:

Activity 1. Prior to class, select a poem to read to the class or choose an audio recording for a particular poem from the archives of Poets.org, found online at <http://www.poets.org/page.php/prmID/361>. Depending on the class curriculum, you may want to choose a poem with which students are familiar, or use a poem mentioned in the article, «A Breezy Exchange Between Old Friends (Jazz and Poetry)».

As students enter the room, hand out instruments or noisemakers, such as rhythm sticks, shakers, drums, and tambourines. These items can be borrowed from the music teacher or created using household items prior to class. (Simple shakers can be made using rice and dried beans in empty jars or containers.) Explain that students will be listening to a poem in order to understand its rhythm and tone. They will then use their instruments and noisemakers to create music evoked by the reading. Explain that students should use their instruments or noisemakers only when directed so that all students can hear the class discussion and poetry reading.

Discuss with students how music can be used to enhance the experience of listening to the spoken word. Have students consider the similarities between music and poetry, such as rhythm, tone and imagery. Read the poem out loud or play the audio file without any musical accompaniment. Allow time for students to absorb the rhythm and tone of the poem.

Ask students:

- What kinds of sounds do you hear?
- What images come to mind when you hear this poem?
- Can you hear a beat in the poem? (You may want to read a line of the poem and tap the beat on a desk to demonstrate what you mean.)

As a class, break down the various rhythm and beats of the poem. Have volunteers clap the beat with their hands or tap on a desk to demonstrate what they heard. Consider speed, notable beats, emotion, etc. Encourage students to identify emotions and sensory details that will help them connect the poem to music. Then, allow time for students to share specific sounds on their instruments that meaningfully highlight and add depth to the poem. Finally, read the poem out loud, allowing various groups of students time to use their instruments to represent the poem's rhythm and tone. (One option is to assign different groups of students to a particular stanza or section of the poem and allow them to perform only during their assigned time.)

Activity 2. As a class, read and discuss the article, «A Breezy Exchange Between Old Friends (Jazz and Poetry)» (http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/20080111friday.html), focusing on the following questions:

- What concern does Robert Pinsky have when he takes the stage at the Jazz Standard?

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- Who is Charles Simic? What do you think his title means?
- What was Mr. Simic's first American experience?
- What music accompanied the poem, «Ginza Samba»?
- What do you think the musical accompaniment added to the reading of the poem? Why?
 - How did Mr. Pinsky interact with one of the musicians accompanying his poem?
 - What does the author of the article think happened when Thelonious Monk's music wasn't played at the same time as a poem about the jazz artist was read?
 - What is the difference in meaning between «meeting» and «melding»? How do you think this difference explains the performance of music and poetry described in the article?
 - How do you think both jazz and poetry can illustrate a particular memory or place in time?

Activity 3. Divide students into pairs. Explain that each team will be pairing a poem of their choice with a song whose music enhances the beat and tone of the poem. The music should reflect the theme, rhythm, tone, history, and any other references that can be made to connect the music to the selected poem. To guide the analysis of their respective poems, partners should consider the following questions (written on the board or copied into a handout prior to class):

- -Who or what is the poem about?
- -When was it written?
- -What time period is reflected in the text?
- -What are the dominant themes?
- -What is the rhyme scheme?
- -What is the rhythm? Tap out the beat on your desk. Try describing it in words.
- -What images, thoughts or emotions are described?
- -How do you react to this poem? Consider how the five senses are engaged, if at all.

Once students have analyzed their poems, allow time for them to find the most fitting musical accompaniment. Remind students to think about rhyme, rhythm, theme, and imagery. For the songs chosen, instruct students to record the title, artist, and year of release. Encourage partners to consider a variety of songs before making a final selection. If at all possible, ask students to locate music files that do not have lyrics. Music can be researched online at sites such as: Pandora Radio (<http://www.pandora.com/>), Rhapsody (<http://www.rhapsody.com/home.html>) and Napster Free (<http://free.napster.com/>).

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If technology does not allow Internet access to music sites, teachers may ask students to bring MP3 players to class or supply students with a variety of music samples, CDs, tapes, live radio stations, etc.

During the last five minutes of class, students discuss the challenges of interpreting text as music.

WRAP-UP/HOMEWORK:

Individually, students write essays explaining their music selections for their respective poems. Students should be as specific as possible, considering elements such as rhythm, tone, imagery and any other relevant factors. In a future class, students read their poems accompanied by the songs they chose. For each poem-song pair, allow classmates to examine the possible reasons for the coupling.

FURTHER QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- To what other types of writing would a musical accompaniment offer enhancement? Why?
- Have you ever listened to a book on tape? How does the recording use sounds other than the human voice to help the reader understand the plot?
- What makes poetry an emotional form of literature?
- What makes jazz an emotional form of music?
- What would you offer as your most unique performing arts experience either as a spectator or a participant? What made it so special?
- Would you have enjoyed being in the audience at the performance described in the article? Why or why not?

EVALUATION / ASSESSMENT:

Students will be evaluated based on meaningful participation in music-making session, engagement in class and partner discussions, careful analyses of selected poems and thoughtfully written explanatory essays.

VOCABULARY:

Laureate, aura, invokes, vibraphone, pithy, reverie, alchemy, melding, bohemia, rhapsody

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

1. Choose a popular song that you enjoy. Write an original poem reflecting its main theme and rhythm.
2. Research what it means to «trade fours» while playing jazz music. To what does the number «four» refer? Prepare an oral report illustrating your findings. Include audio clips to help explain what this concept is and how it is done.

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3. Research what it means to be a poet laureate. How does a poet get this position? What are the responsibilities? How long does the poet remain in this post? Write a research paper exploring your findings. Highlight the works of several poets laureate you find interesting.

4. Research the poetry of either Robert Pinsky or Charles Simic. Prepare a biographical study of their written work as it relates to their personal lives and events in history. What subject matter did they favor most? Why? Prepare a report on your findings.

5. Illustrate how poetry often inspires other fine arts pieces. Create a visual timeline or poster showing your findings. For example, the 1939 title, «Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats» by T.S. Eliot is a collection of poems that inspired a composer to create a work in 1954 called «Practical Cats», in which 6 of the poems were read by a speaker and set to music. In 1981, another composer created the musical «Cats» using the characters created by T. S. Eliot.

6. Research why Mr. Simic recalled that «hearing Coleman Hawkins with Red Allen at the Metropole Café on his first night in the United States» was «a high note». Explain your findings in a historical essay.

(By Amanda Christy Brown and Holly Epstein Ojalvo// From The New York Learning Network, November 4, 2010)