

Lesson Idea 3: More Than Words

Music has the ability to express what words alone cannot. However, putting words and music together in specific ways can communicate certain moods, emotions, or stories quite powerfully. Students can do this text-setting in a group, or it can be adapted for individual exploration and creation.

Materials: index cards, bigger pieces of paper (or staff paper), pencils, an assortment of instruments (non-pitched and pitched percussion, string or band instruments, keyboards, whatever you can get a hold of!), recording device or computer

Step 1: Favorite Songs

Have students reflect on songs they know well, and give the following prompts so they can brainstorm strategies:

- *What do singers do with their voices to set a certain mood?*
- *What specific choices do they make when singing particular lyrics to bring attention to them? (e.g., make certain words louder, longer, higher, "Beyoncify them" to create a melisma, etc.)*
- *What are examples of songs where the accompaniment is really contrasting to what the lyrics are talking about?*

Step 2: Three-Line Poems

Have students write three fairly short lines of text and send it to you. The poem should communicate a very clear mood, emotion, or situation (similar to a haiku). The words do not have to rhyme like a poem, but they should paint a specific picture in the mind, or make a reader feel that emotion by choosing very evocative or "juicy" words.

Here are some examples:

1. A single bird
Alone is the moonlight
Waiting... for the break of day
2. Let's go, Let's go, Let's go!
Never been to the beach before!
Down by the Florida Shore...
3. I wish my friend
Did not move away
So many tears

If in a group chat space, have the rest of the class give each student sharing their poem specific ideas about sounds they could use both a) when singing, and b) when accompanying themselves. Encourage students to respond to the text. This could also be done one-one-one by video or email.

Step 3: Text Setting

Ask each student to incorporate some of the ideas they received from you or their classmates, as well as new ideas they have. Have them consider the following questions:

- *What words are to be stressed for meaning? Underline these on your paper.*
- *Which words could be repeated for emphasis? Write these in.*
- *How can the words be sung in a melody?*
- *How can you play the instruments in a way that really sets the mood of the “mini-song” while supporting what the singers are doing? Is there a rhythmic groove? Or are the sounds atmospheric? Does that change at some point?*

Have each student experiment with humming, singing, or using online keyboard apps to find pitches for their poem melodies. As appropriate, have students notate pitch and rhythm underneath their poem or just use line to show melodic contour.

Ask them to give their song a title.

Step 4: Share & Reflect

Have students sing their mini-songs live on camera, or record them and upload. Alternatively, they can send you their notation for you to comment on or record and send back for their review.

Reflect on the process:

- *What have you learned about lyrics and melody?*
- *What things about songwriting are you curious about?*
- *When you listen to one of your favorite songs, what could you wonder about as you think about the songwriter’s process?*