

**CREATE YOUR OWN
VARIATIONS!**

LESSON PLANS

COPYRIGHT © 2013 MARK A. TAYLOR

INTRODUCTION

WELCOME to the world of teaching composition. Composition is an often overlooked part of the instrumental curriculum, yet an important part of how we understand music. The three main questions we often ask about a new teaching unit are:

1. Does this apply to me?
2. How much time will it take?
3. How will this benefit my students?

This composition unit may be applied to both private and classroom instruction for instrumental students who are able to: play quarter notes, eighth notes, and half notes; read and play at least 2 one octave scales; understand accidentals. It is recommended that students have at least one year of instruction, but this may vary depending on the students and teaching circumstances. This unit is also a great tool for more advanced students looking to get into or refine their composition technique.

Each lesson takes about 15-20 minutes, which includes the time it takes for teachers to check student progress in class settings. It is important that students have time to work independently, which can either be done afterwards in the classroom or at home. Lessons may be taught once a week (“Composition Friday”) or every day. The unit serves as a productive activity for classroom teachers for downtime after concerts, during setup or cleanup at the bookends of a school year, or for an enrichment club activity.

Teaching composition has definite benefits for your students and your program. The work your students do will also help foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of music. Although all are interconnected, there are three fundamental ways to experience music. Active listening is a creative experience drawing on our knowledge of history and theory as well as our own personal experiences. Performing allows us to breathe life into the music of others. Finally, we may create new music through either composition or improvisation. While most instrumental teachers work on listening with their students and spend the majority of their time on performing, teaching composition offers students a unique and important depth of understanding and long-term interest in music.

In the words of Carl Orff, ““Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand.” When we look at a flower, we notice its beauty. When we study photosynthesis, understand about nutrients in the soil, and try growing and caring for those plants ourselves we begin to understand something else. That flower is a miracle of life. Likewise as music teachers, we cannot limit our students by only telling them how music works while listening or showing them how it works in the music they play. We must involve students in creating music to help them understand that music, too, is a miracle of life.

LESSON 1: NOTATION

Objective: Students will be able to write a major scale with proper notation.

Materials: *Create Your Own Variations!* (CYOV) worksheet, manuscript paper, pencil, instrument, staves for demonstrating (on a blackboard or whiteboard for larger classes)

Procedures:

1. Read over the “Welcome” section of the worksheet with students.
2. Read over the “Notation” section of the worksheet with students, excluding the questions.
3. Model for students how to draw each clef step by step, having students copy you on the top line of their own manuscript paper. Visit the Audiovisual page of CompositionTaylor.com and refer to “Variation Lesson 1” as a reference for drawing the clefs or other aspects of notation.
4. Assist students who need help and check those who do not need help. Once a student’s clefs have been approved, the student may draw his or her clef at the beginning of each line of the manuscript paper.
5. Model how to draw a proper notehead. Point out that a note head that is too small is hard for performers to read and one that is too big makes it hard to distinguish from other notes.
6. Students draw one filled in notehead in the fourth space and one in the first.
7. Model how to draw a stem extending one octave from the notehead. Point out that generally speaking, notes *on or above the third line* have stems that extend **down** on the **left** of the notehead and notes *below the third line* extend **up** on the **right** of the notehead.
8. Model drawing a note on the third line and one on the fourth space (B and C in treble clef). Connect the notes with a beam to make them eighth notes and have the students do the same. Other note values can be modeled depending on the level of the class.
9. Model how to draw a sharp, flat, and natural in front of one of the previously drawn notes, pointing out that while we say “C sharp,” we draw the accidental first.
10. Students complete the “Notation” section of the worksheet. Review the answers using the *CYOV Answer Key*.
11. On the second line of manuscript paper, students draw a major scale of your choice with proper notation. For the remainder of the lessons have students use accidentals rather than key signatures so that they think about each pitch.

Assessment: At this point, the goal is for students to understand proper notation. Check student work as you go to make sure they understand each step. If a student does not do the work correctly, have the student do it again until it is right rather than marking the assignment down.

LESSON 2: WRITE THE THEME

Objective: Students will understand the terms “theme” and “variation.” Students will notate a given folk melody.

Materials: *Create Your Own Variations!* (CYOV) worksheet, manuscript paper, pencil, instrument, staves for demonstrating (on a blackboard or whiteboard for larger classes)

Procedures:

1. Review Lesson 1: Notation by reviewing the CYOV worksheet.
2. Students will complete the “Define” section. Use the CYOV *Answer Key*.
3. Students will figure out how to play a given folk melody on their instrument. Give students the starting note. “Frere Jacques” is an excellent option for its familiarity, use in many methods books, and potential use as a round. Assist students as needed. Students who finish early or are more advanced may explore other keys and octaves.
4. Once most students are finished, the class may perform it together.
5. Write the melody on the board, having the students play the notes together.
6. Using a clef and proper notation, students will write the melody on the manuscript paper. Depending on teacher preference, students may use meter and barlines. Writing without barlines, however, often encourages composers to think “outside the box.” With the exception of the Metric Variations, meter is not included in this lesson set (but may be implemented at the discretion of the teacher).
7. Once checked by the teacher, students may write a final draft of the melody on the CYOV worksheet to be used as the theme. Having all students start on the same note is recommended.

Assessment: The final draft may be assessed in terms of notation, pitch, and rhythmic accuracy. The use of meter and barlines may be assessed at the discretion of the teacher.

LESSON 3: MODAL VARIATIONS

Objective: Students will write a variation where only pitches are altered.

Materials: *Create Your Own Variations!* (CYOV) worksheet, manuscript paper, pencil, instrument, staves for demonstrating (on a blackboard or whiteboard for larger classes)

Procedures:

1. Review Lesson 1: Notation and Lesson 2: Write the Theme by reviewing the CYOV worksheet.
2. Reinforce the definition of theme and variation.
3. Read the “Modal Variations” section of the worksheet with students.
4. Play or have the students play the examples.
5. Emphasize that for this exercise, students should add or take away accidentals without changing the letter names of the notes. Provide written and aural examples as needed.
6. Emphasize that students should experiment by playing rather than writing first. This will encourage the natural music sense of the students, help them use their instruments as a means of expression, encourage audiation in later compositions, and ensure the pieces are playable.
7. Students may begin to experiment on their instruments.
8. While students begin to come up with final versions, remind them of the three rules under the “Welcome” section of the CYOV worksheet.
9. Sketches and drafts can be written on manuscript paper.
10. Help students with notation and rhythmic dictation as needed.
11. Once approved by the teacher, students may write a final draft on the CYOV worksheet.
12. Students who finish early may either share their variations with others or work on a new modal variation.

Assessment: The final draft may be assessed in terms of notation, pitch, and rhythmic accuracy. The use of meter and barlines may be assessed at the discretion of the teacher. Students should not be assessed on whether or not the teacher likes the piece, but on whether or not they followed the directions found in the “Modal Variations” and “Notation” sections.

LESSON 4: ORNAMENTAL VARIATIONS

Objective: Students will embellish a theme by adding extra notes.

Materials: *Create Your Own Variations!* (CYOV) worksheet, manuscript paper, pencil, instrument, staves for demonstrating (on a blackboard or whiteboard for larger classes)

Procedures:

1. Review Lesson 1: Notation and Lesson 2: Write the Theme by reviewing the CYOV worksheet.
2. Reinforce the definition of theme and variation.
3. Read the “Ornamental Variations” section of the worksheet with students.
4. Play or have the students play the examples.
5. Emphasize that for this exercise, students embellish the theme by adding extra notes. Provide written and aural examples as needed. It may help to demonstrate writing out the first couple measures with eighth note subdivisions first (Ex. 1), then going back and changing the pitches of notes not on the beat (Ex. 2). Triplet eighths and sixteenths may also be used.

Ex. 1



Ex. 2



6. Emphasize that students should experiment by playing rather than writing first. This will encourage the natural music sense of the students, help them use their instruments as a means of expression, encourage audiation in later compositions, and ensure the pieces are playable.
7. Students may begin to experiment on their instruments.
8. While students begin to come up with final versions, remind them of the three rules under the “Welcome” section of the CYOV worksheet.
9. Sketches and drafts can be written on manuscript paper.
10. Help students with notation and rhythmic dictation as needed.
11. Once approved by the teacher, students may write a final draft on the CYOV worksheet.
12. Students who finish early may either share their variations with others or work on a new ornamental variation.

Assessment: The final draft may be assessed in terms of notation, pitch, and rhythmic accuracy. The use of meter and barlines may be assessed at the discretion of the teacher. Students should not be assessed on whether or not the teacher likes the piece, but on whether or not they followed the directions found in the “Ornamental Variations” and “Notation” sections.

LESSON 5: METRIC & RHYTHMIC VARIATIONS

Objective: Students will embellish a theme varying the pulse and/or value of the notes.

Materials: *Create Your Own Variations!* (CYOV) worksheet, manuscript paper, pencil, instrument, staves for demonstrating (on a blackboard or whiteboard for larger classes)

Procedures:

1. Review Lesson 1: Notation and Lesson 2: Write the Theme by reviewing the CYOV worksheet.
2. Reinforce the definition of theme and variation.
3. Read the “Metric & Rhythmic Variations” section of the worksheet with students.
4. Play or have the students play the examples.
5. Emphasize that for this exercise, students may experiment with different rhythms such as dance rhythms or rhythms of their own. Provide written and aural examples as needed. It may help to demonstrate by playing a tango rhythm (Ex. 1).

Ex. 1



6. Emphasize that students should experiment by playing rather than writing first. This will encourage the natural music sense of the students, help them use their instruments as a means of expression, encourage audiation in later compositions, and ensure the pieces are playable.
7. Students may begin to experiment on their instruments.
8. While students begin to come up with final versions, remind them of the three rules under the “Welcome” section of the CYOV worksheet.
9. Sketches and drafts can be written on manuscript paper.
10. Help students with notation and rhythmic dictation as needed.
11. Once approved by the teacher, students may write a final draft on the CYOV worksheet.
12. Students who finish early may either share their variations with others or work on a new metric and rhythmic variation.

Assessment: The final draft may be assessed in terms of notation, pitch, and rhythmic accuracy. The use of meter and barlines may be assessed at the discretion of the teacher. Students should not be assessed on whether or not the teacher likes the piece, but on whether or not they followed the directions found in the “Metric & Rhythmic Variations” and “Notation” sections.

LESSON 6: ARTICULATION & TIMBRE VARIATIONS

Objective: Students will apply articulations and extended techniques to a given theme.

Materials: *Create Your Own Variations!* (CYOV) worksheet, manuscript paper, pencil, instrument, staves for demonstrating (on a blackboard or whiteboard for larger classes)

Procedures:

1. Review Lesson 1: Notation and Lesson 2: Write the Theme by reviewing the CYOV worksheet.
2. Reinforce the definition of theme and variation.
3. Read the “Articulation & Timbre Variations” section of the worksheet with students.
4. Play or have the students play the examples.
5. Model the proper notation and techniques for various articulations and extended techniques. Students may try the techniques as you introduce them. Techniques may include staccato, slurs, tremolo, sul pont., gliss., trills, etc. (Ex. 1).

Ex. 1



6. Emphasize that students should experiment by playing rather than writing first. This will encourage the natural music sense of the students, help them use their instruments as a means of expression, encourage audiation in later compositions, and ensure the pieces are playable.
7. Students may begin to experiment on their instruments. For some students, it helps to think of a programmatic theme for the sake of cohesion.
8. While students begin to come up with final versions, remind them of the three rules under the “Welcome” section of the CYOV worksheet.
9. Sketches and drafts can be written on manuscript paper.
10. Help students with notation and rhythmic dictation as needed.
11. Once approved by the teacher, students may write a final draft on the CYOV worksheet.
12. Students who finish early may either share their variations with others or work on a new articulation and timbre variation.

Assessment: The final draft may be assessed in terms of notation, pitch, and rhythmic accuracy. The use of meter and barlines may be assessed at the discretion of the teacher. Students should not be assessed on whether or not the teacher likes the piece, but on whether or not they followed the directions found in the “Articulation & Timbre Variations” and “Notation” sections.

LESSON 7: FINAL VARIATION!

Objective: Students will compose a variation on a given theme using any combination of techniques they have learned from the *Create Your Own Variations!* unit.

Materials: *Create Your Own Variations!* (CYOV) worksheet, manuscript paper, pencil, instrument, staves for demonstrating (on a blackboard or whiteboard for larger classes)

Procedures:

1. Review Lesson 1: Notation and Lesson 2: Write the Theme by reviewing the CYOV worksheet.
2. Reinforce the definition of theme and variation.
3. Read the “Metric & Rhythmic Variations” section of the worksheet with students.
4. Review the different ways the students may vary a melody by reviewing the previous lessons.
5. Students may use any combination of compositional techniques they have learned to compose the final variation. It may help to demonstrate combining techniques such as a tango rhythm with minor tonality, pizz. on an ornamental variation, etc.
6. Emphasize that students should experiment by playing rather than writing first. This will encourage the natural music sense of the students, help them use their instruments as a means of expression, encourage audiation in later compositions, and ensure the pieces are playable.
7. Inform students that this variation may be performed, recorded, or copied as part of a class set.
8. Students may begin to experiment on their instruments.
9. While students begin to come up with final versions, remind them of the three rules under the “Welcome” section of the CYOV worksheet.
10. Sketches and drafts can be written on manuscript paper.
11. Help students with notation and rhythmic dictation as needed.
12. Once approved by the teacher, students may write a final draft on the CYOV worksheet.
13. Students who finish early may either share their variations with others.
14. See the “Going Beyond” section for ideas on performance, recording, etc.

Assessment: The final draft may be assessed in terms of notation, pitch, and rhythmic accuracy. The use of meter and barlines may be assessed at the discretion of the teacher. Students should not be assessed on whether or not the teacher likes the piece, but on whether or not they followed the directions found in the “Final Variation!” and “Notation” sections.

GOING BEYOND

Now what? Take your students beyond the basics to make it an even more enriching and meaningful musical experience. Below are some ideas for what can be done with the compositions once they are complete.

- *Students may perform their variations for small groups or for the class*
- *Students may form groups to compile variation sets to perform in groups for the class*
- *Students and student groups may record the variations/variation sets*
- *Some may wish to make the variation into a round if possible or figure out basic accompaniment for the variation*
- *This is also an excellent project for introducing music notation, sequencing, and recording software*
- *Though already copyrighted, you may work with your students on how to submit a composition for a government copyright*
- *This is an excellent opportunity to talk about pirating music, protecting your works in the age of social media, etc.*
- *There are several youth composition contests that students may consider reviewing and entering.*
- *Program a variation set from another composer for your ensemble and talk about the tricks s/he used.*
- *Find and advertise new music concerts in the area to your students.*