

## **Rationale:**

The purpose of this activity is to get learners thinking about the way music can be used as a form of storytelling and not as something meant to sound pretty. Learners will also experience non-chord tones, dissonance and rhythmic syncopation. This song was chosen for learning altered syllables like “te” and this rhythmic dissonance because it’s a fun piece that can be used to teach not only music theory, but American History and folklore. The history behind the piece covers controversial topics such as race, which is something that is glossed over through Virginian American History courses.

## **Understanding Statements:**

Skills:

- Students will be able to identify non-chord tones by step or by leap.
- Learners will be able to see a syncopated rhythm and be able to audiate and demonstrate it.

Knowledge:

- Learners will know that non-chord tones can be used to make music more interesting. Meaning they will know why non-chord tones are used.
- Learners will know how music can be used to tell history and a story.

## **“I can” statements/standards:**

- I can identify the meaning of the upper and lower numbers on the time signature (VA 6.1.6)
- I can read rhythmic patterns that include whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, eighth notes, and their corresponding rests. (VA 6.1.5)
  - I can also perform/present rhythmic patterns that include whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, eighth notes, and their corresponding rests. (VA 6.4)
- I can examine the importance of cultural influences and historical context for the interpretation of music (VA 6.8.1)

## **Materials:**

- A cowbell and the mallet that goes with it
- A recording of John Henry (either from Disney or from spotify)

- Poster of the solfege hand signs and their altered syllables
- Several posters with the rhythms for the difficult, syncopated measures in the song
  - This means one with 3 rests and 2 8th notes, one with an eighth note-quarter note-5 eighth notes, and one with 2 quarters-an eighth-and a dotted quarter.
- Sheet copies of the music

### **Detailed Process:**

1. Bring the class together by making/encouraging them to make “train chugging sounds” to the steady beat (“ch-ch-ch-ch”) encourage them to continue the steady beat while I sing the melody two times through on the first verse lyrics hitting rhythms that have syncopation on the cowbell. (2-3 minutes)
2. Ask them what they all think the song is about based on what they heard, what it makes them think of, or even if they had heard it before. Introduce the name of the song “John Henry” as an American folk song. Turn on either the recording or the Disney video of the song (which ever one is readily available) (7-10 minutes)
3. Invite the class to break into groups of two or three to discuss the contents of the lyrics for about. Walk around and engage each group at least once to see what they retained. Bring the class together so that each learner can express what was most important to them based on the lyrics they retained. After they get their comments through, sing through the lyrics of the first verse 2 more times while tapping the rhythm and encouraging the learners to tap the rhythm as well. Break the room in half so that half of the learners will tap the rhythms and half will tap the steady beat. Then have the learners mouth the lyrics while tapping the rhythms once while I sing, and then have them sing with me while tapping the rhythms. (6-8 minutes)
4. Ask them to demonstrate how the first phrase goes (lyrics: When John Henry was just a little baby), this is for the quarter-eighth-quarter rhythm and for the anacrusis. Clap the rhythm of that pattern. Then ask them to demonstrate the second phrase (lyrics: sitting on his daddy’s knee) in a similar fashion for the quarter-eighth-dotted quarter rhythm and the pickup into that phrase as well. Ask the learners what makes those rhythms similar to each other, but different from the rest of the song. [if they can’t identify what’s wrong, ask one to three learners to

tap eighth notes while the rest of the room sings the lyrics]. Explain that that is syncopation and it's in most pop or hip-hop songs on the radio. Pull out the posters that have the rhythms on them and have the learners speak the lyrics with the note heads. (7-8 minutes)

5. Encourage the students to stand up in the circle. Here they will focus on the second and third phrases for the "te". When "te" appears in the line, squat (because te is lower than ti). Go through those two phrases 2 more times with that motion. On the second time, use solfege hand signs. If the students appear confused, go through the scale and instead of the normal "la-ti-do" change it to "la-te-ti-do". Explain the use of altered syllables in music. Ask the learners if/where they have heard other altered syllables in their favorite songs. (10-12 minutes)
6. Invite 1-2 students to pass out the sheet music, ask for volunteers to read the other verses to the class. Begin a discussion about when this was, where it was speculated to be (either Virginia or West Virginia), and where it could be over-exaggerated or romanticized. Ask the students how the tune was effective in portraying the story. (10-12 minutes)
7. If there is time left, invite the learners to sing through the rest of the piece with the other lyrics.

### **Assessments:**

- While going through teaching the anacrusis, the students will look at the time signature and will be asked which beat the song starts on. If a learner can answer it properly (being 3) and can also demonstrate it correctly, they are meeting and going beyond expectations. If a learner won't respond but can demonstrate the correct anacrusis while tapping the steady beat they meet expectations. But if a learner neither responds or demonstrates, they go below expectations.
- If a learner can identify a part of the song based on the rhythm they see on the posters and demonstrate them properly with lyrics, body percussion, and rhythm syllables, they exceed expectations. If a learner is able to identify a part of the song based on the rhythm on the posters and can demonstrate them with body percussion and lyrics, they met expectations. When a learner cannot identify a part of the song based on the poster or demonstrate it, they go below expectations.
- If a learner responds to my questions for the historical context, have their own anecdotes, and appear interested in what others have to say,

they go beyond expectations. If a student appears interested in what others have to say about the historical context, but are saying similar things to their peers and do not have personal anecdotes, they meet expectations. If a learner doesn't participate or tries to disrupt the class they go below expectations.

**Adaptation:** How will you open this experience up for learners with different ways of engaging and knowing? Consider adaptations to:

#### Color

- Different rhythmic lengths can be different colors on the poster. Students can be broken into two different color groups to help with breaking the class into two for tapping the steady beat or the melodic rhythm.

#### Shape/Size

- If there is enough room for the group to be in a circle then they will on the floor, if the room is filled with desks or tables, they will sit at whatever table they feel like or sit in the front on the floor. If the class is larger, there will be less time for focusing on each student individually

#### Pacing

- The opening exercise is a larger part to get the attention of the class which can take more or less time depending on what kind of day each student is having.
- There might be more time spent on learning the lyrics which helps with the rhythms and make the altered solfege make more sense. It might turn into a small call and response segue.
- There can be a break to review different rhythms they had before if they appear to lose immediate interest in John Henry. There can also be an activity that will get their energy out with the song where they can pick up an egg shaker or a drum and they can play whatever they want alongside it.

#### Modality

- The experience is designed with as little speaking as possible, however depending on the learners, they might need more spoken instruction.

## **Extension**

I would love to expand this song to Orff instruments to work with ostinato and multiple parts. In this case, I would extend the solfege to note names so they would be able to identify the note on a staff and the orff instrument. This is a piece that could be performed on orff alongside a middle school choir during a concert either as an entire class or as a volunteer basis. Doing so would help these students with performing even outside an ensemble classroom.