



From the Top at Carnegie Hall
Episode 10:
"Music Is Where the Heart Is"
Airing on PBS (check local TV listings)
Available online at pbs.org

Learning Activity

Title: *We'll Improvise*

Description: Students will watch an inspired jazz-style performance of "Old MacDonald" and then try improvising on their favorite children's songs.

Grade Level: 5-8

National Music Standards: **3** Improvising melodies, variations and accompaniments; **6** Listening to, analyzing and describing music

Background

This episode includes two jazz-inspired classical pieces and one jazz version of a familiar children's song, "Old MacDonald" by fourteen-year-old jazz singer Nikki Yanofsky. One of the major identifying characteristics of jazz is *improvisation*: using the written score as a guide and making up your own variations on the music. Nikki sings "scat" during her performance. Scat singing, in which a performer uses non-word sounds or nonsense syllables to improvise rhythms and melodies, is the hallmark of jazz vocal improvisation. Classical musicians improvise, too, but usually only where the composer has indicated that a *cadenza* is called for. The cadenza gives the performer a chance to exhibit his or her range, technique, and musicality.



Nikki Yanofsky sings "Old MacDonald" onstage at Carnegie Hall

Jazz is a truly American musical genre, with its roots in the music that African slaves brought with them to North America as captives. Emerging in the late 1800s as a distinct style, jazz drew on musical forms such as field songs, spirituals, the blues, and ragtime, with both African and European influences. The lively, energetic, and free-form qualities associated with jazz, and especially its distinctive and strong rhythms, have made it popular all over the world.

Materials

Computer with media player; speakers, projector if needed; paper and pencils

Activity Instructions

- 1) **Ask students what they know about jazz.** Explain that in the video they are about to see there is an improvised vocal part using a jazz style called "scat singing." If they are familiar with scat, write some examples on the board (nonsense syllables, etc.).
- 2) **Watch** the segment in which Nikki sings "Old MacDonald". Ask students to **write down or remember** (for auditory learners) some of the syllables Nikki uses.
- 3) **Discuss** how she did it! Things to talk about are tempo, rhythm, pattern, melody, and how she moves back and forth between scatting and the original words and tune.
- 4) **Divide students** into small groups of four or five. Ask them to pick a familiar children's song and **try scatting themselves**. Then have them demonstrate for their classmates.

Find out more!

About jazz

A good collection of resources from the U.S. Department of Education
http://www.free.ed.gov/subjects.cfm?subject_id=156&toplvl=3

Explore the differences and similarities between classical and jazz music

Read about the musical techniques that characterize each genre:
<http://www.kennedy-center.org/programs/jazz/ambassadors/Lesson1.html>

About the history of jazz

Check out the wonderful PBS program by Ken Burns, with interactive online resources for children, at:
<http://www.pbs.org/jazz>



Jazz artist Ella Fitzgerald, 1940; photo courtesy Library of Congress, Van Vechten Collection

About scat singing

Wikipedia has a well-researched article on scat singing with some excellent audio examples. Here's a quote:

Though scat singing is improvised, the melodic lines are often variations on scale and arpeggio fragments, stock patterns and riffs, as is the case with instrumental improvisers. As well, scatting usually incorporates musical structure. All of Ella Fitzgerald's scat performances of "How High the Moon," for instance, use the same tempo, begin with a chorus of a straight reading of the lyric, move to a "specialty chorus" introducing the scat chorus, and then the scat itself.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scat_singing

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