



From the Top at Carnegie Hall
Episode 12:
"Bach to the Future"
Airing on PBS (check local TV listings)
Available online at pbs.org

Learning Activity

Title: *We'll Improvise*

Description: Students will compare jazz and classical performances by the same trumpeter, 15-year-old Kyla Moscovich, and will improvise a jazz version of a familiar classical tune.

Grade Level: 9-12

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

Background

Kyla Moscovich comes from a musical family and has been visiting jazz clubs since she was a baby. Now 15, she plays both classical and jazz trumpet. In this episode we see her doing both. Kyla says that for her playing classical music requires more maturity and focus than playing jazz, while jazz offers more freedom.

As we saw in episode 10 (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/fromthetop/video/season-2/210.php>), 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. In rehearsal, Chris O'Riley surprises Kyla by moving from the classical piece as written (Kent Kennan's *Sonata for Trumpet and Piano*) to an improvised version. Kyla is able to play along with Chris and is clearly enjoying the chance to improvise on a classical number.



Kyla Moscovich onstage at Carnegie Hall

Both jazz and classical music frequently use a device called *ostinato* (Italian for obstinate or stubborn) to provide a theme or foundation for a musical work. *Grove's Dictionary Online* defines *ostinato* as "the repetition of a musical pattern many times in succession while other musical elements are generally changing." A well-known example from classical music is the four-note motif that opens Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and is repeated throughout it. In American music such as jazz, *ostinato* is also very common and is sometimes referred to as a "groove." The name is different, but the sentiment is the same!

Materials

Computer with media player; speakers, projector if needed; CD of familiar classical piece such as "Ode to Joy"; paper and pencils

Activity Instructions

1) **Ask students what they know about jazz**, making some notes on the board as they talk. Explain that in the video they are about to see the performer plays in both classical and jazz styles. How do students think classical and jazz are different?

2) **Watch** the segment that features Kyla Moscovich. Ask students to note what Kyla says about the two different genres of music and what feelings she has about both. Does she look or move differently when playing classical as opposed to jazz?

3) Both jazz and classical music can create a **back-and-forth conversation between players**, or groups of players. Here are some questions to ask students:

- Can students see a conversation happening when Kyla plays Kennan with Chris O'Riley?
- What about when she is playing in the jazz ensemble?
- Are there examples of *ostinato* in these pieces?
- How are they used?
- How is Kyla changing the music as she improvises – rhythm, melody, tempo, dynamics, articulation, other ways?

4) Now students will use their observations to **improvise jazz based on a classical piece**. **Pick a simple classical melody** that students know such as "Sheep May Safely Graze" by Bach or Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." Ask them to form small groups of 4 or 5 people. Instrumentalists and vocalists can mingle in these groups, or they can form groups that are solely instrumental or vocal. Have the groups listen to the classical piece several times, noting melody, rhythm, style, and other key characteristics. Can they find an *ostinato* to use in their improvisation?

- One way of improvising an ensemble piece is to begin with one person playing a groove (*ostinato*!). **Ask students to suggest possible grooves** based on the classical melody they are working with. Start with a solo groove that follows the "S" rule: *simple, spacious, steady*. Simple, spacious, and steady grooves leave lots of room for the other members of the ensemble to fill in. Keep adding members of the ensemble until all are in.
- You can **vary the improvisation** by having the person who started drop out and solo over the rest of the ensemble. When his/her solo is finished, s/he comes back in with the original groove, and the next person follows suit, until all members of the ensemble have had a chance to solo.

- At some point, the piece needs to end. One way to do this is for the first person to drop out, then the second, followed by the third, until just the last person is left. Another way is for the ensemble to listen to each other and feel the energy change. The piece will just end – really!

5) Ask students to **reflect on this experience**, writing in their journals or sharing their observations with the class.

Find out more!

About jazz

A good collection of resources from the U.S. Department of Education is at:

http://www.free.ed.gov/subjects.cfm?subject_id=156&toplvl=3

Another PBS series, by Ken Burns, focuses on jazz and includes excellent classroom materials:

<http://www.pbs.org/jazz/classroom/>

You can learn more about American jazz masters at:

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/education/index.html>

About mixing classical and jazz

There are some great examples of artists who “crossover” between jazz and classical music, such as the **Swingle Singers**, whose CD *Beauty and the Beatbox* includes Mozart, Purcell and Ravel, or **John Lewis**, music director of the Modern Jazz Quartet, who made several CDs based on Bach preludes and fugues.



Jazz pianist John Lewis
Photo courtesy Juilliard School

Other jazz activities from our series

You can hear brass players from the New York Philharmonic with an 18-year-old tuba player on Episode 6:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/fromthetop/video/season-2/206.php>

Episode 10 is all about jazz, with Gershwin and scat singing:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/fromthetop/video/season-2/210.php>

About Kyla Moscovich

Kyla appeared on From the Top's radio show. You can hear her performance and interview at:
<http://www.fromthetop.org/Programs/performers.cfm?pid=2449>

This activity was prepared with the help of Dr. Constance E. Barrett, From the Top collaborator and string specialist in the Greenwich, Connecticut public schools. She is a 2007 recipient of the Yale University School of Music Distinguished Music Educator Award.

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