



M·U·S·I·C
for

young
people

musicforagreatspace.org

Khemia Ensemble's Dr. Annie Jeng, piano
&
Marcos Balter's *Dreamcatcher*

Lesson Plan for Grades 9-12: Music for a Great Cause

Music for a Great Cause

Grades 9-12

Introduction

Music has been used for plenty of different reasons: entertainment, to tell stories, to relax, or to inspire are just a few... but music can also be used for social justice purposes. Songs and chants are common during protests of every kind and for every cause.

Music is used in several different ways to portray meanings. Some of those meanings are very obvious, such as songs used during protests. Other composers may decide to place codes in their music that are only meant for specific people to understand. And other music portrays an idea that is more abstract, but is understood once the composer shares the meaning.



Protest/Inspirational Music

Music used for protests or meant to be inspirational are usually the most obvious. Chants during protests are meant to be short, quick, and easy to repeat. They're supposed to be direct and catchy! Protest songs can also be a full length work that shares a very specific message. Popular artists, such as Green Day, Lady GaGa, and even Tony Bennett have written protest songs for various causes.

These protest or inspirational songs address a wide variety of topics: gun control, environmental concerns, wage gaps, and poverty are just a few. Ultimately, protest and inspirational songs can be used for whatever purpose is important to the artist. There is also not one specific genre of music that fits protest or inspirational music. It can be rap, pop, gospel, or country.... It's the message that is important, not the style of music!

Check out this list of protest songs by a wide range of artists. Be aware, some of the music might contain some strong language. A long list of protest and inspirational songs can be found [here](#).

Coded Music

Other composers have used music in coded ways. These codes have usually been meant for specific people to understand. Sometimes these codes are meaningful, and sometimes composers just use the codes as the basis of a method to write codes throughout music.

Among the most well known of these is Johannes Sebastian Bach using his last name as theme for multiple melodies. The letters B ♭ -A-C-H translated to B-A-C-B ♯ (H in German stands for B ♯).



The music above is a segment from the unfinished fugue in *The Art of the Fugue*.

Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich also used his initials in his music as codes. The most famous is his 8th string quartet in c minor, with the opening melody of the first movement D-E ♭ -C-B standing for D.SCH (in Shostakovich's system, the S was E ♭). Listen to the 8th string quartet [here](#).

Other types of codes were included in music, such as Gustav Mahler's use of klezmer music in his first symphony. Mahler was Jewish, but antisemitism was rampant in Europe during his lifetime. In order to have his music performed, he publicly converted to Catholicism. However, the use of klezmer music, which is a traditional Jewish style of music from Eastern Europe. The faster dance-like music is featured in the [third movement of his Symphony 1](#) - many scholars believe this to be his way of 'thumbing his nose' at societal norms of antisemitism.

Abstract Meanings in Music

Composers will also often write music that is meant to portray the emotion behind a certain event or message. For example, *Dreamcatcher* by Marcos Balter is meant to evoke heightened emotions from families being separated at the borders. Balter talks more about the inspiration for this [piece here](#). Balter discusses wanting to raise the emotion of a child separated from their parents while trying to find safety by crossing the borders.

You can also [see a recording of Dreamcatcher here](#)

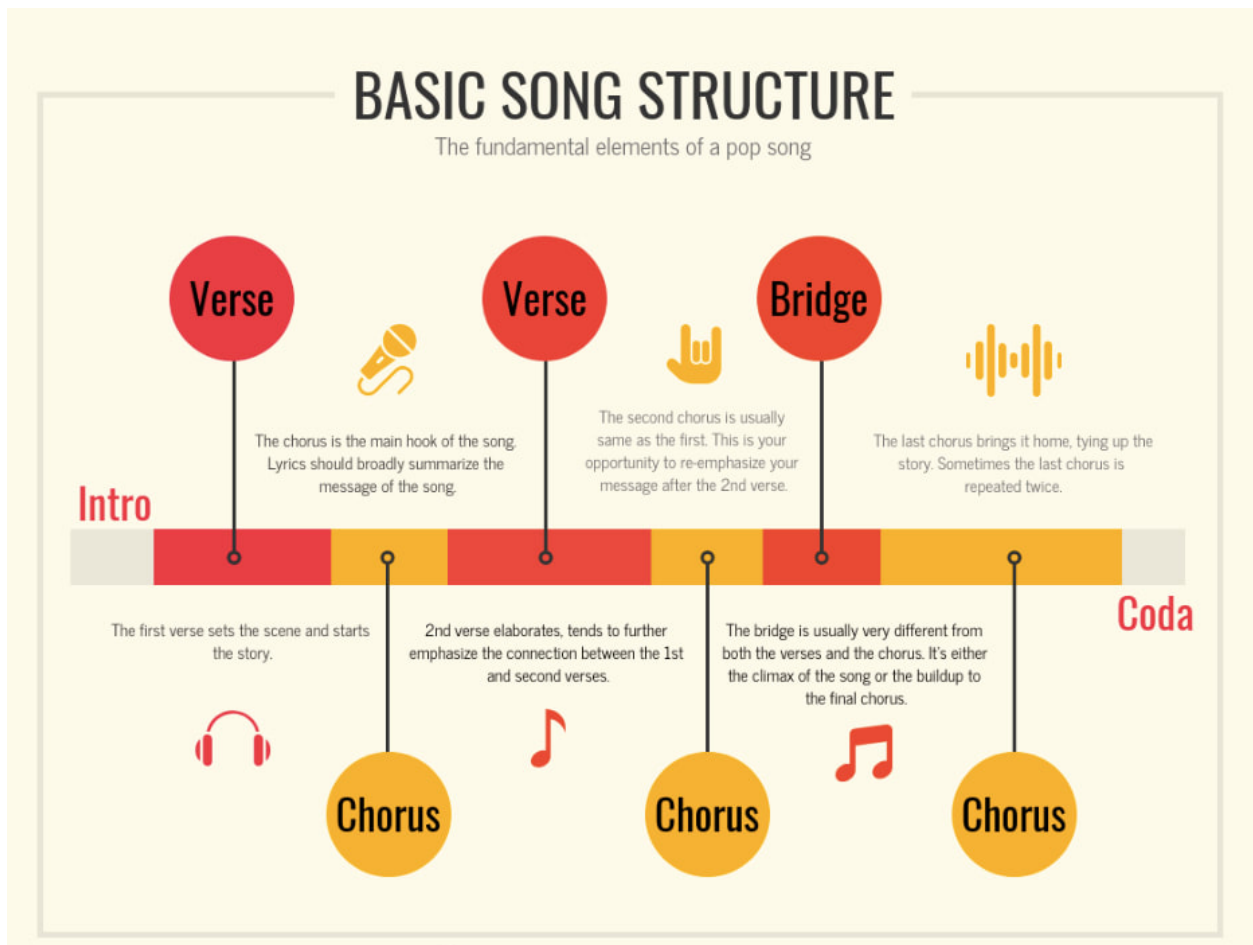


performed by pianist Dr. Annie Jeng, a member of Khemia Ensemble, as part of their performance on the Music for a Great Space series in April 2024.

Activity

Write Inspirational Lyrics

Think of a cause that is important to you (equal wages, animal rights, immigration, gun control, etc.) and write the lyrics to a short song about that cause. See the diagram below for a typical song. Remember, a bridge is a section of the song that is different from a verse or the chorus. Think about whether you want the bridge to be the last key point, or whether you want it to lead into the final chorus.



Here's a helpful tip: once you have an idea of what you want to write about, think about how you can make your song rhyme. Remember that most songwriting is mainly poetry, so think about the rhythm of the lyrics as well. How many syllables does each line have? Do they fall into rhythm, or do they seem random? Once you have that ironed out, you should be good to go!