



CRAFT IN AMERICA

HISTORY AND IMPROVISATION: MAKING AMERICAN MUSIC EDUCATION GUIDE

Teaching *History and Improvisation: Making American Music*

Overview

Students will take notes and make sketches while viewing the MUSIC episode. After a class discussion of the video, students will use the worksheet *Musical History* to research facets of history presented in the program. Later, during studio time, students will use the worksheet *Innovative Instruments* to plan their own instruments and experiment with materials in the maker space.

(Video and Discussion: (two 45 minute class period)

Before Viewing

Introduce the scope of the lesson to students, sharing the key concepts, critical questions, and objectives. You might choose to show the video in two sessions. Give students an overview of the MUSIC episode. Post the following themes on a poster or a board for students to record, while they take notes during viewing. Allow students to work in teams so they can cooperatively gather the information as they watch the episode on the DVD or online at craftinamerica.org/episode/music.

They will be listening and looking for the following:

- References to the history and politics of instruments and music.
- Descriptions of musicians' personal connections to their instruments.
- Words and phrases used to describe how instruments make sounds.
- Hand decorating on instruments: Create quick sketches of these.

After Viewing/Discussion

Begin a discussion of the video. What did students find interesting? What questions do they have? Using students' notes, discuss the information they gathered about the listed categories.

The following points and questions may be helpful.

- History and Politics: Ask students if they noted stories about the heritage of the ukulele, the banjo, and jazz music in America. What stories do the Kamakas tell about the ukulele? How did the ukulele get its name?
- Scotty Barnhart states, "Jazz was created by African Americans in this country who were not even looked upon as full human beings by the constitution. And here they are creating something that's timeless; that had no precedent in western art." From this

CRAFT IN AMERICA

HISTORY AND IMPROVISATION: MAKING AMERICAN MUSIC EDUCATION GUIDE

quote, what can students determine about the place in society of African Americans in the 19th century? How does Barnhart define jazz music?

- Musicologist William L. Ellis says, "The African diaspora gave us the banjo in America. There are many prototypes of the banjo that come with the slave trade." What kinds of materials do you imagine were used to make these early banjos?
- Joan Baez shares a story about being called a "communist." What is the dictionary definition of the word "communist?" What are the various social meanings of the word "communist?" Examine the lyrics from Joan Baez's songs, available at her website. Find a song that you believe has political content, and share the lyrics. What are the words that give you the sense of Baez' opinion on a particular issue?
- Joan Baez says that, "People say that music changes the world. And it does. But the guitar and the songs have to be backed up by action..." What are some changes Baez attempted and attempts to inspire with her music? Can you think of a popular song today that inspires political or social change?
- Musicians and Instruments: Scotty Barnhart says of his new trumpet, "It will tell my life story." How will it tell his story? In what way do his choice of figures to decorate his trumpet refer to his statement about the history of jazz?
- Barnhart also says of his Monette trumpet, "Working with Dave's instruments, I'm not struggling with it, I'm not fighting it. This is how it's supposed to be. I just play, as if I'm breathing." How does the special crafting of the trumpet make that possible?
- Casey Kamaka claims that the well-made ukulele "has soul" and that it "comes alive." Jake Shimabukuro says of the ukuleles that "They're sensitive...they respond to everything you do." What do Kamaka's and Shimabukuro's statements say about the connection of musicians to their instruments?
- In what way is guitar designer Emily Meixell's statement similar? She says, "Great guitars will bring songs out of you, and I think the emotional part of that is what makes Martins so loved."
- What is Joan Baez' favorite guitar, and why? What story does Joan Baez tell that proves her strong personal connection to her old Martin guitar? Do you think the hand crafting of the instruments plays a part in all of the musician's statements about them? If so, in what way?
- Sounds and Construction: Timpanist Joseph Pereira says, "I have a ton of mallets, but the more refined you get in thinking about sounds, the more you want to dig deeper into getting the sound that you want... Trying to get the right sound is endless." Do the student musicians in the class feel the same way?
- What other personal pursuits and art forms can you think of in which the process of perfecting might be described as "endless?" Do you think Pereira enjoys that pursuit? Pereira describes a timpanic sound as a "big ringing dark sound."
- Mallet maker Jason Ginter uses words such as "articulate" and "bright" to describe a particular kind of mallet on the timpani. Can you think of any music that fits these descriptions?

CRAFT IN AMERICA

HISTORY AND IMPROVISATION: MAKING AMERICAN MUSIC EDUCATION GUIDE

- Emily Meixell says of guitar construction, “If this x-brace is moved up, it’s going to sound different. Even half an inch.”
- Casey Kamaka says of building a ukulele that “as you lighten these braces up and you adjust the shapes of them, acoustically it starts to come alive.”
- Geoff Stelling describes checking a finished banjo: “I have to tell if the neck angle is correct...the bridge position has to be within a thousandth of an inch. The string height has to be correct.”
- Meixell’s, Kamaka’s, and Stelling’s comments are all about proportions in construction. Do they give you ideas about how you might experiment with materials to make an instrument? What kinds of processes do you think will make a difference in the sounds?
- Decorations: Tony Ellis says of banjos that they are “one of the most ornamented instruments. It’s probably because of the old Dixieland bands, where they actually put lights inside the banjo to shine through the head... so the banjo became a really flashy instrument.” What other instrument decorations did you note, and how were they crafted?
- How does Rhiannon Giddens’ banjo differ in appearance from the Stelling banjo? Why does she want this kind of banjo?
- What iconic symbols will decorate Barnhart’s trumpet? Who would you feature on an instrument? How would you symbolize that person?

Reflection

If possible, have students shoot video of their classmates playing the instruments and talking about how they created, or tried to create them. Students may plan their performances and film each other, using a similar style to the Craft in America program they have recently viewed.

Some suggestions for video prompts include:

- What is the instrument you created?
- How did you get the idea?
- Did anything go wrong in making it? What did you learn by making this?
- Can you explain the decorations on the instrument?
- What did you find most memorable about the MUSIC episode we watched? Did any of the musicians or instrument designers inspire you?

Assessment

In discussions with the class and with individual students throughout the lesson; by examining the students’ worksheets; and by witnessing the students’ studio work, it should be evident that the students:

CRAFT IN AMERICA

HISTORY AND IMPROVISATION: MAKING AMERICAN MUSIC EDUCATION GUIDE

- Delineated the connections between American music and American history and politics illustrated in the MUSIC episode.
- Researched and analyzed the emotional and physical connections musicians have to their instruments.
- Experimented and designed a musical instrument from collected and recycled loose parts.
- Used hand crafting techniques to refine the function and beauty of a musical instrument.

Extensions

Students may decide to further refine their instruments, or try different constructions. There are many online sources devoted to homemade instruments, particularly banjos and guitars:

- cigarboxnation.com
- homemade-guitars.com