

Musical Tapestry

Summary

In this activity, students will learn about the terms and structure of a bluegrass tune, then participate in a listening exercise that will challenge them to identify specific elements within a bluegrass musical arrangement.

Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- explain the structure of a bluegrass tune
- define several words relating to this structure
- identify different instruments as they listen to a bluegrass tune
- identify the lead, melody, and breaks as they listen to a bluegrass tune

Time

1 period

Background

The distinctive sound of bluegrass music is made up of many layers. The rhythm and melody can change several times within a tune, which is what makes the music so exciting and so complex. At any one time, there is usually one instrument taking the lead to play a solo (also called a “break”) version of the melody in such a way as to demonstrate the unique qualities of their instrument. The acoustic guitar and the stand-up bass usually provide the basic rhythm for bluegrass music, accenting the “one” and “three” beats (downbeats) to drive the music forward while instruments like the mandolin and banjo play on the “two” and “four” beats (upbeats).

Teacher’s Notes

This week’s content introduces several new words relating to the structure of a bluegrass tune. It is important that students have a clear understanding of the meanings of these words before they try to identify a tune’s components while listening to a musical selection.

Making predictions is an integral part of gaining meaning from reading selections. Whether consciously or not, readers are continuously anticipating what comes next. When used as a “before reading” strategy, students rely on their background knowledge to make predictions. Then, while reading, students can combine their background knowledge with the textual information provided to assess initial predictions and revise those which have been found to be inappropriate. The *Predict & Confirm Worksheet* will help students to think carefully about the concepts introduced in this week’s essays. Be sure to review the new vocabulary before beginning the listening exercise.

Vocabulary

Accompaniment, break, “chop” chord, downbeat, 4/4 time, improvise, lick, lead, solo, upbeat

Materials

Access to the sitesALIVE! website, copies of the *Predict & Confirm Worksheet* (**provided**), 4/4 time audio example (**provided**), blank paper (for making signs), writing utensils

Procedure

1. Begin by informing students: “In this activity, you will learn about the structure of a bluegrass tune and the specific roles of each instrument in that tune.”
2. Pass out copies of the *Predict & Confirm Worksheet* to students, then tell them that there are many new vocabulary words that will be mentioned in the essays. Students may know some of the words but others may be new to them. Before allowing students to read the essays online, have them write a prediction of the meaning for each word listed on the worksheet.
3. Next, instruct students to read the online essays either alone or in pairs. As they read, have students confirm the word definitions in the “confirm” column of the worksheet.
4. After all students have had a chance to read the essays, go over the meanings of the new vocabulary words together.
5. The final step of this activity is a listening exercise, using a bluegrass tune in 4/4 time (i.e., a tune with four beats in each measure). The purpose of the activity is to help students to understand the downbeat/upbeat rhythmic alternation of bluegrass music and to analyze the roles of different instruments within a bluegrass tune.
 - a. Have students listen to a 4/4-time bluegrass tune (**provided**), and count 1-2-3-4 along with the musical beats.
 - b. Next, have students listen to the tune again, clapping along only on the 1 and 3 beats (downbeats), in the traditional bluegrass bass or guitar role.
 - c. Then, have students try clapping along on the 2 and 4 beats (upbeats), in the traditional banjo or mandolin role. Ask students: Is this task easier or more difficult? Why?
 - d. Have students listen to the bluegrass tune again (or listen to a different 4/4-time bluegrass tune of your choosing) while thinking about the questions at the bottom of the *Predict & Confirm Worksheet*.
 - e. As a class, answer the worksheet questions.
 - f. Next, assign students to represent particular instruments or elements of a bluegrass arrangement (banjo, fiddle, guitar, mandolin, bass, melody, solo, break, lick, etc.). Have each student hold a sign to signify their instrument or musical element.
 - g. Listen to the tune again and have students stand up whenever they hear their instrument on a solo, or hear their particular musical element, and sit down when they do not. There will be a lot of moving around!
 - h. Trade signs to give other students a chance either with the same tune or with a new one.

Extend the Experience

Divide the class into two halves. **Without listening to music**, have one half of the class clap on the downbeats and the other half clap on the upbeats in 4/4 time. Then, speed up the tempo. Maintaining the downbeat vs. the upbeat is relatively simple at slow tempos, but becomes very hard at fast tempos. What usually happens is that the downbeat clappers project a kind of attraction or “gravity” and pull the upbeat clappers back onto the downbeat. Bring your students to the tempo where the rhythm starts being hard to do, and then slowly try to increase the pace as a challenge.

Predict & Confirm Worksheet

Directions: In this week's essays, you will see several new words used to describe the structure of a bluegrass tune. Some of the words from the essays appear in the left-hand column. Before you read the essays, predict what you think each word will mean. As you read, check your predictions and write in the actual meanings in the "confirm" column.

Vocabulary Word	Predict	Confirm
lead		
break		
downbeat		
upbeat		
melody		
improvise		

Listen carefully to a sample of bluegrass music.

What was the first lead instrument? _____

What other instruments did you hear? _____

Did you hear any improvisation? When? _____

Which instruments (if any) had solos? _____