

Artsource

*The Music Center's Study Guide
to the Performing Arts*

TRADITIONAL

CLASSICAL

CONTEMPORARY

EXPERIMENTAL

MULTI-MEDIA

ARTISTIC PROCESSES

1. CREATING (Cr)

2. PERFORMING, PRESENTING, PRODUCING (Pr)

3. RESPONDING (Re)

4. CONNECTING (Cn)

TRANSFORMATION

ENDURING
VALUESFREEDOM &
OPPRESSIONTHE POWER
OF NATURETHE HUMAN
FAMILY

Title of Work:

Variations for Piano and Orchestra: I Got Rhythm (1934)

Creator:

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Background Information:

George Gershwin, celebrated American composer and pianist, was born in Brooklyn and grew up in Manhattan's East Side neighborhoods. When his parents bought a piano ostensibly for brother Ira, George surprised his parents by playing it. Thus began his inroad into the world of music. His first professional job was that of a 'song plugger,' at age 16, in Tin Pan Alley. At that time (1914), publishing houses used pianists to play new music as a way of advertising their new songs to the public. Although George was among the best 'pluggers,' his employers ignored his early attempts at composing. His next job as rehearsal pianist introduced him to the world of musical theater, where he learned much that influenced his own compositional style. He collaborated with his brother Ira, a writer, and they published their first song in 1918. The next year they enjoyed their first hit, "Swanee." From that time until his death, George enjoyed the life of a celebrity. Although he initially gained fame for his contributions to the musical theater, he also composed for the orchestra, solo piano, films and opera. When George Gershwin suffered an untimely death at age 39, he was mourned internationally. His legacy remains as the first American composer to successfully bridge two areas in the world of music, popular and concert. Today his music is heard and performed daily throughout the world. In 1992 the Gershwin Musical Comedy, "Crazy for You," was awarded the Tony for Best Musical as well as the Drama Desk and Outer Critic Circle Award. In 2012, Broadway stages

offered both *Nice Work if You Can Get It*, featuring music by Gershwin, and *Porgy and Bess*, winner of the 2012 Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical.

About the Artwork:

The term 'variations on a theme' means just what it implies. Composers use their creative skills and musicianship to change a melody, several times, each version introducing interesting and clever ideas, while maintaining the basic character of the melody. Gershwin's *Variations* employs changes in rhythm, dynamics, tempos, instrumentation, tone color and styles. The melody always retains its basic rhythmic motif.

Creative Process of the Artist or Culture:

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Gershwin "created a new type of urban American music." The song, *I Got Rhythm*, was introduced in the Broadway musical *Girl Crazy* in 1930. It is an upbeat, fun song based on a simple four-note rhythmic motif. In 1934 Gershwin revived the song in *Variations for Piano and Orchestra: I Got Rhythm*. His various clever ideas provide an entertaining romp for piano and orchestra and delightful listening for all. A lone clarinet introduces the basic theme, or melody. The piano plays a little flurry, followed by the full orchestra. The piano then states the theme in solo. (Descriptions of the Four Variations are on the next page.)



Photo: Carl Van Vechten

"I've been asked to play my tunes so many times that I've naturally been led to compose variations. Manipulating a tune is fun and I love to experiment with new harmonies and arrangements."

George Gershwin



Discussion Questions:

After listening to the audio recording:

- Elaborate on the brief description of the variations given below. Describe the use of instruments, the basic role of the piano and the interplay of musical elements.
- Describe the mood of the melody *I Got Rhythm*.
- What basic style influenced Gershwin's music? Why do you suppose he was described as a new king of American composition?

Description of the Four Variations:

Variation 1 - The piano performs a complicated rhythm pattern while the orchestra performs the melody.

Variation 2 - This time the theme is stated in waltz time (3/4 meter). The orchestra handles the melody while the piano plays an obligato. Toward the end the piano and orchestra alternately play the melody.

Variation 3 - While the melody remains with the orchestra the piano, supported at times by the xylophone, imitates the sounds of Chinese flutes.

Variation 4 - Lilted strings and jazz band sound alternate with the piano in presenting the melody.

Finale - The melody alternates between different sections of the orchestra and the piano, with a full orchestra and piano wind-up.

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Multidisciplinary Options:

- Read about New York and its performing and visual arts scenes in the 1920s and 1930s. Compare the movements in the visual arts, literature and poetry, drama and dance with what was happening in music during this period.
- Learn about the historical events and economic and sociological changes which occurred in the United States during the first four decades of the twentieth century, the period during which Gershwin lived. Hypothesize how these circumstances may have affected Gershwin's music.
- Learn a popular dance or dance step from the 1920s or 1930s. (Charleston, Lindy Hop, Truckin', Suzy Q) Compare its style with a popular dance of today.
- Listen to a recording of the vocal version of *I Got Rhythm*. Discuss how the lyrics reflect one of the prevailing attitudes of that time period.

Audio-Visual Materials:

- *Artsource*® audio recording: Gershwin describes and

performs *Variations on I Got Rhythm*; April 30, 1934 "Music by Gershwin" radio program; Rare Recordings, 1931-1935, Musical Heritage Society. Used with permission of the Gershwin Estate and Warner Chappell Music, Inc.

- George Gershwin photo credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Carl Van Vechten Collection.



Additional Materials:

- *Gershwin - Greatest Hits. (I Got Rhythm)* Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops. RCA Victor, BMG Classics, 1991.

Sample Experiences:

LEVEL I

- Select and learn a group of easy to sing songs from the 1930s. Present as a chronological review of the 1930s interspersed with a few significant historical events which occurred during that period. Start and end the presentation with Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm*.
- * • Look for variations on a theme in the everyday environment. Find examples in old magazines. Cluster pictures by their basic 'themes,' e.g. shoes, cars, chairs, flowers, trees, bridges, houses. Lead a discussion on the variations observed within each cluster.
- * • Create variations on a familiar song (theme). Consider changes in rhythm, dynamics, tempos, vocal tone color, instruments, mood and style.

LEVEL II

- Study the life of George Gershwin and listen to examples of his music which demonstrate different styles i.e. selections from musicals, symphonic and orchestral works, songs, piano works and opera.
- Examine, analyze and compare each occurrence of repetition in the melody, *I Got Rhythm*.

LEVEL III

- * • Collect the names of composers who wrote for the American Musical Theater. Categorize each name appropriately into two-decade groupings, e.g. 1900 - 1919, 1960 - 1979. Divide the class into study teams to learn about the musicals of their assigned periods.
- Discuss the simplicity of the four-note rhythmic motif upon which the melody to *I Got Rhythm* is based. Listen for the expansion of the motif into a theme, and then the variations on that theme. Follow the same progression when creating original motifs.

* Indicates sample lessons

ORNAMENT THE ORDINARY TO MAKE IT SPECIAL

TRANSFORMATION

LEVEL I Sample Lesson

INTRODUCTION:

Composers, over time, have enjoyed restating melodies (or themes) so that some features of the original remain while alterations, deletions and additions are made. The devices employed often include changes in duration, key, meter, tempo, mood or styles. Sometimes the theme is even turned upside-down, or ‘ornamented’ with extra notes. The Gershwin variations on the melody, *I Got Rhythm* employs some of these changes.

Guiding students in creating variations on a familiar song (theme) will give them an opportunity to manipulate musical elements in a way that may serve to deepen understanding.

OBJECTIVES: (Student Outcomes)

Students will be able to:

- Understand and demonstrate ‘theme and variations’ by varying a familiar tune. (Responding & Performing)
- Describe, discuss, analyze and connect information and experiences based on this lesson. Refer to *Assessment* at the end of this lesson. (Responding & Connecting)

MATERIALS:

- A collection of used pictorial magazines (from which to cut pictures).
- A familiar song.
- Chart paper and markers, or chalk and chalkboard.
- Classroom instruments (optional).



PROGRESSION:

PREPARATION:

Have the students collect pictures of items to group under selected categories, such as: shoes, trees, flowers, chairs, buildings, birds, fish, insects, lamps, houses. Display and discuss each group separately, focusing upon the basic likenesses and the obvious differences. Conclude that there are various distinctions within groupings, but the group label accurately refers to each item. Compare this to the manner in which composers create variations on a basic theme, called ‘theme and variation.’



LESSON:

- Sing a familiar song.
- Ask the students to sing it again, but in a much faster tempo.
Write - **Variation 1: tempo faster.**
- Next have them sing the song, alternating from loud to soft on each phrase.
Write - **Variation 2: dynamics loud to soft.**
- For the next variation, give them a higher starting pitch and ask them to sing with high, squeaky voices.
Write - **Variation 3: tone color squeaky.**
- In the fourth variation guide them in changing the rhythm. If the song has a smooth, even rhythm, change it by adding syncopation. If the song has an uneven rhythm, change it to an even rhythm.
Write - **Variation 4: rhythm uneven (or even).**
- Solicit ideas for additional variations from the students. Record their suggestions in the same manner.
- Put the ideas together by singing the melody in its original form, followed by the variations.

EXTENSIONS:

- Repeat the activity using a different familiar song with all of the ideas for variations suggested by the students.
- Listen to Gershwin's *Variations for Piano and Orchestra: I Got Rhythm*. Describe this composer's variations (see descriptions in the unit, p. 2).
- Listen to another composer's variations on a theme. Suggestions: *Variations on 'America'* (Ives), *American Salute* (Gould), *Greeting Prelude* (Stravinsky).

VOCABULARY: dynamics, melody, tempo, theme and variations, tone color

ASSESSMENT: (Responding & Connecting)

DESCRIBE: Describe one of the variations you used to change the song.

DISCUSS: Discuss the variation you think changed the song in the most interesting way and give reasons why.

ANALYZE: Look again at the items you collected and discuss what makes them all alike and what makes each of them different.

Emphasis on: Common Core - CA State Standards for Language - Reading; Writing; Listening; Speaking

REPETITION AND CONTRAST

TRANSFORMATION

LEVEL II Sample Lesson

INTRODUCTION:

Repetition and contrast are two very important principles in music. In the song *I Got Rhythm* a repeated four-note rhythmic motif is the primary element. It is contrasted by a completely different melodic idea at the end of each phrase. In this lesson the students will examine and compare each occurrence of the rhythmic motif and recognize the contrasting ideas.

OBJECTIVES: (Student Outcomes)

Students will be able to:

- Recognize and compare the repeated and contrasting musical ideas. (**Responding & Creating & Connecting**)
- Describe, discuss, analyze and connect information and experiences based on this lesson. Refer to *Assessment* at the end of this lesson. (**Responding & Connecting**)



MATERIALS:

- *Artsource*® audio recording: *I Got Rhythm* (Gershwin).
- Chart paper and markers, or chalk and chalkboard.

PROGRESSION:

- Have the students chant the rhythm pattern *I got rhythm* several times.
- Play the recording and ask the students to count each time the “I got rhythm” rhythm pattern is heard in the song (13 times). Remind them that although the rhythm pattern is always the same, it does change melodically.
- Next, listen to the first phrase and note the number of times the rhythm pattern is heard (3 times).
- Point out that although the same rhythm is repeated there is a change which gives the phrase added interest (contrasting idea). Solicit responses. Possible responses, (1) first rhythm pattern - melody moves up, (2) second rhythm pattern - melody moves down, (3) third rhythm pattern - melody moves up.
- Illustrate the melodic direction of the rhythm patterns with line drawings.
- Next, ask the students to listen to each repetition of the rhythm pattern throughout the song to determine likenesses and differences. Have the students illustrate their responses using line drawings as demonstrated on the chart. The line drawings should resemble this:

Phrase 1

I got rhythm, I got rhythm, I got my man . . .

Phrase 2

Phrase 3

Phrase 4

- Play the recording again and ask the students to note additional contrasting segments of the song. (The end of each phrase.)
- Review and discuss repetition and contrast as demonstrated in *I Got Rhythm*.

EXTENSIONS:

- Indicate the melodic direction in the “I Got Rhythm” rhythm pattern using blank notation, illustrating scale, step and repeated tones.
- Listen to other compositions in which the rhythmic or melodic pattern is a unifying element. Example: *Symphony #5*, First Movement (Beethoven).

VOCABULARY: melody, melodic direction, phrase, repetition, rhythm pattern

ASSESSMENT: (Responding & Connecting)

DESCRIBE: Describe the difference between rhythm and melody.

DISCUSS: Discuss how and why the rhythm pattern is repeated 13 times in the song, but the melody of the rhythm pattern can and does change. How is this possible? Do you know other songs that do this?

ANALYZE: Discuss the contrasting segments of the song at the end of this phrase. Does the contrasting part make the song more interesting or less interesting to you? Why?

CONNECT: Where else in the world around us are there repeated rhythmic patterns?

Emphasis on: Common Core - CA State Standards for Language - Reading; Writing; Listening; Speaking

THE AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE

TRANSFORMATION

LEVEL III Sample Lesson

INTRODUCTION:

The American musical theatre has risen to a place of high esteem worldwide. Students will discover that this genre has not only produced music classics and revolutionized drama/theatre and dance techniques, but significant productions have chronicled history, revived literary works, spoofed politics and reflected economical and sociological changes. George Gershwin and his brother Ira made important contributions to the American musical theatre.

OBJECTIVES: (Student Outcomes)

Students will be able to:

- Learn aspects of the history of the American musical theatre. (**Responding & Connecting**)
- Discuss the contributions the Gershwin brothers and others made to American musical theatre. (**Connecting**)
- Describe, discuss, analyze and connect information and experiences based on this lesson. Refer to *Assessment* at the end of this lesson. (**Responding & Connecting**)

MATERIALS:

- Recorded excerpts from 20th century American musical theatre. (Resources listed in the Schwann Record Catalogue which can be found at most record stores.)
- Reference books on American musical theatre. (Suggestions listed at end of unit)

PROGRESSION: (To be conducted over several sessions.)

- Provide a scrambled listing of American musical theatre composers and lyricists, their musicals and productions years.
- Divide the class into five groups.
- Assign each group to a two-decade period, i.e.

1900 - 1919, 1920 - 1939, 1940 - 1959, 1960 - 1979, 1980 - present

- Ask each group to select composers and their works which were produced during the two-decade period assigned to them. (A listing is provided at the end of the unit.) Explain that this information will serve as a basis for developing a group report. The reports should include historical information, song hits, featured players and significant facts which made the production unique.

- Suggest that students within each group might work on different segments of the report. Then the group members might work cooperatively to organize and prepare a documentary report which could be presented via student dramatizations, song presentations, narratives, photographs/slides and audio/video excerpts. (Seek assistance from a school/college/university drama department.) Videotape each group's presentation.

The following may assist students in searching for pertinent facts.

- Which composer/lyricist teams produced hit songs which have become classics?
- Name some of these classics and the musicals in which they were introduced.
- Which musicals reflect the changing tastes of the public?
- Name performers who performed in musical theater productions early in their careers, and later rose to stardom.
- Identify musicals that later became films, and films that were eventually produced on Broadway.
- Find productions that were instrumental in changing the style and form of musicals. Pinpoint the changes.
- Look for choreography that revolutionized dance.
- Name popular music styles that have influenced musical scores.
- Discuss how modern technology has affected productions.
- Identify film and stage stars who literally carried productions.
- Spot productions that made stars.
- Locate the lean years of American musical theater.
- Identify the abundant eras of American musical theater.
- Note the number of decades in which the Gershwin productions occur.

EXTENSION:

- Convert the student sketches into an American musical theatre review and present before a live audience.

VOCABULARY: composer, lyricist, libretto

ASSESSMENT: (Responding & Connecting)

DISCUSS: Use the above topics and questions to stimulate discussion and analysis about the key aspects of musical theatre.

CONNECT: Discuss the differences between Musical Theatre and Rock Videos which become visual stories.

Emphasis on: Common Core - CA State Standards for Language - Reading; Writing; Listening; Speaking

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Films and excerpts (on video) based on American musical theater productions.
- Bordman, Gerald, *American Musical Theater: A Chronicle*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Ewen, David. *New Complete Book of the American Musical Theater*. New York: Henry Holt, 1976.