



## VH1 Ultimate Albums Alicia Keys, Songs in A Minor

VH1 Music Studio  
Cable in the Classroom

Lesson for Music Classes, Grades 7-12

### Lesson 2

Note to Teachers: The programs viewed in conjunction with these lesson plans may include references, consistent with the eras portrayed, to substance abuse, violent acts, and topics of a sexual and/or political nature. Because this may be considered inappropriate for classroom use in some communities, you are encouraged to review the programs before presenting them to your students, and if necessary, choose those sections that enhance your lesson and are acceptable for use in your classroom.

### Objective

- Students will discuss the genre of musicals and the elements that successfully convey a storyline.
- Students will create a biographical one-act musical about the life of Alicia Keys.

*NOTE: To get the most benefit from this lesson, it may be necessary to dedicate two or three class periods to these activities. If this is not possible, teachers should feel free to adapt the lesson for a shorter time frame by limiting the activities to brainstorming and discussion.*

#### National Standards for Music Education

1. Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
2. Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
4. Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.
5. Reading and notating music.
6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
7. Evaluating music and music performances.
8. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.
9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

## Materials

- VHS VCR Player
- Television
- VH1's *Ultimate Albums: Alicia Keys, Songs in A Minor*
- Web-based lesson materials
- Pencils, pens, markers, notebook paper, and staff paper (students)
- Copies of Elements of a Musical checklist for students (included with lesson)
- Chalkboard, overhead projector, chart, etc. for brainstorming exercises
- Internet access (optional) and research materials

### Prior Knowledge:

- Students are familiar with the genre of musical theater (see “Supplemental Resources” for lesson ideas on this topic).
- It would be beneficial for students to have completed Lesson one of this series, and to have watched the entire program, but it is not required.

## Procedures

1. Ask students to define the term “biography,” or “biographical.” Lead them in a short discussion of the elements of a subject’s life that would be included in a biography (date and place of birth, parents, schooling, activities, significant influences, etc.). Tell students that they are going to watch a VH1 program (or segments of it) about the background and career of pop artist Alicia Keys. Encourage them to take notes about Alicia’s life that would be considered important if writing a biography, and to notice the themes incorporated into her music.
2. Show VH1’s *Ultimate Albums: Alicia Keys, Songs in A Minor*, in its entirety. (If watching the entire program is not possible, students should at least watch segments one and two. Showing segments one and two for students who have previously watched the program may be beneficial for review.)
3. Alicia Keys frequently says that her music is written from what she experiences in her life. Lead students in discussing the biographical nature of her songs. Why is this an effective way to write music? Does it help an audience to better relate to an artist? Is this why the nation has reacted so strongly to her music? Use the following quote from her online biography ([www.aliciakeys.net](http://www.aliciakeys.net)) as needed:

“Reflecting on her latest project, Alicia notes: ‘My music doesn’t have a beginning or end. It’s continuous. I didn’t stop writing after the first album came out and everything I wrote since came from the experiences in my life, of being on the road, traveling, dealing with different situations. Once I got to the studio, I began to let those things out of me. By the time I did start thinking about how I wanted the new album to be, I had so many songs. You see I don’t put myself in any kind of box; I speak freely with my music. I knew that the second album would naturally be different from the first one because of all of the growing up I did during the past three years.’”

4. Ask students to brainstorm other methods of sharing a biographical story. In what ways can a person tell

the story of their life, or that of another person? If students do not mention “musical theater,” suggest this medium as well.

5. Draw students’ attention to musical theater as an effective way of telling a story. If students have previously studied any of the VH1 programs listed in the “Supplemental Resources” below, ask them about the techniques used to relate those stories. The following examples may be helpful and the teacher may provide additional examples with which the students are familiar.
  - The song “Coming Up Roses” from *Gypsy* conveys the feeling of betrayal that Mama Rose experiences when her daughter finally stands up to her. While the audience knows Mama Rose is acting irrationally, it can still identify with her grief through the music.
  - The song “Bring Him Home” from *Les Miserables* propels the story line by showing that Valjean recognizes the love between Marius and Cosette, and shows his depth of character by his willingness to sacrifice his own life, while at the same time evoking an emotional response from the listener through the music.
6. Tell students they are going to create a one-act musical based on the life of Alicia Keys. Divide students into groups and assign each group one of the following “jobs”: scriptwriter, music director, staging director, choreographer, set designer, and costume/make-up designer (merge jobs if class is small). Explain that although each group has its own job, they must work together. (If appropriate, consider assigning one or two students to “produce” the musical by coordinating the activities of all of the groups, or the teacher may serve in this capacity.)
7. If time allows, it may be helpful for students to research musical theater productions. (At [www.musicals101.com](http://www.musicals101.com), they can study the structure of a musical, sample lyrics, scripts, and books that will assist them in creating a musical.)
8. As a class, lead students in a brainstorming session about their biographical musical featuring Alicia Keys. If they were given time to research the topic, have them share their findings and discuss the structure of a musical. What are the first decisions they will need to make as a group (mood of storyline, characters, etc.)? Have students brainstorm a list of sources where they might find information about the artist (song lyrics, CD inserts, her official Web site, etc.).
9. Distribute copies of the Elements of a Musical checklist and have students create a design plan for the one-act musical. Design plans may be text based outlines or drawn, and can be approached in different ways:
  - Outline the important events in Alicia Keys’ life and when they occurred
  - Using the events outline, expand it by outlining the emotions the artist shows through her life by using a song rather than a date or time
  - Choose musical selections and create text to tie them togetherStudents should complete the checklist as a class, brainstorming ideas for the script, set, costuming, choreography, and music, so everyone understands the goal for the finished product once they begin working in their small groups.
10. Working in their small groups and using the completed checklists, have students begin to create their musical. They may also watch segments of other musicals to gain a better understanding of the genre and inspiration for their production.
  - Scriptwriter: The script should include at least 3 characters. Students should focus on the goal of what the musical needs to convey, and the vocabulary should reflect the characters. Script-

writers will need to work closely with music directors to combine these two important elements.

- Music director: Students must evaluate and choose which types of music should be used in the musical to complement the script. They should mostly select songs by Alicia Keys, but may also compose their own music. Music directors will need to work closely with scriptwriters to coordinate their efforts.
  - Staging director: These students are responsible for blocking the musical, and will need to work closely with the choreographer and set designer. They may wish to work with the set designers directly until the script and music are finalized.
  - Choreographer: Students should create at least one dance to be used in their musical. It should be at least 32 measures long. Choreographers will need to work closely with the music directors, staging directors, and scriptwriters.
  - Set designer: Students should provide a location and scenery design. They may draw and/or find appropriate pictures, and should locate props if they are needed. Set designers must work closely with the staging directors.
  - Costume/make-up designer: Students should find examples of appropriate costumes via drawing, cutting out magazine pictures, and/ or Internet research. They should bring in costuming pieces if the musical is staged. Costume and make-up designers must work closely with choreographers and staging directors to insure that costuming will not restrict performers' movement.
11. Review student designs throughout the development process by asking what their motivation is for their particular decisions. Encourage students to examine their work to make sure it is meeting the goals the class set up initially for the musical.
  12. Have students perform their musical for the class and/or invited guests such as parents, students, staff members, etc. (optional)

# Elements of a Musical

## A Checklist

**Type of Musical** (Comedy, Tragedy, Drama, etc.)

**Character profiles** (who are they, how old are they in the scene, personality)

**Script** (outline of major events, characters involved, goal of message to be conveyed)

**Music** (songs with tempos, moods, and motivation for including them)

**Choreography** (which songs should be choreographed, which performers)

**Staging and Set** (locations of scenes, set requirements)

**Costuming/make-up/hair design** (costuming appropriate to scene locations and topics)

#### Extensions:

1. Design a rubric based on the Elements of a Musical checklist for easy grading of the project.
2. Lead students in discussing the role that politics can play in the writing of music and musicals. How can musicals from different eras reflect the politics of the time? VH1's Behind the Music 2000 Lesson Series (lesson 1) at [www.vh1musicstudio.com/supplies/btm/btm\\_2000-1.html](http://www.vh1musicstudio.com/supplies/btm/btm_2000-1.html) may be helpful:

#### Supplemental Resources:

- Alicia Keys Web site: [www.aliciakeys.net](http://www.aliciakeys.net)
- Music Theatre International Web site: <http://www.mtishows.com/index.asp>
- "The Cyber Encyclopedia of Musical Theater, TV, and Film": [www.musicals101.com](http://www.musicals101.com)
- VH1's *Behind the Movie: Chicago* ([www.vh1musicstudio.com/specials.html](http://www.vh1musicstudio.com/specials.html)) lesson series provides additional activities related to musical theater.
- VH1's *Fan Club: ABBA* ([www.vh1musicstudio.com/supplies/specials/abba-4.html](http://www.vh1musicstudio.com/supplies/specials/abba-4.html)) lesson series provides a lesson that focuses on using a group's already existing music to create a musical (Mamma Mia).
- VH1's *Movies that Rock: Moulin Rouge* ([www.vh1musicstudio.com/specials.html](http://www.vh1musicstudio.com/specials.html)) lesson series discusses the genre of the movie musical and set design.

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4. Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.
5. Reading and notating music.
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These standards-based materials are provided through a partnership with MENC: The National Association for Music Education. This lesson plan was created by MENC member Patricia Wunsch, New Egypt High School, New Egypt, New Jersey.