



CMT Crossroads
Sheryl Crow and Willie Nelson
VH1 Music Studio
Cable in the Classroom

Lesson for Music Classes, Grades 7-12

Lesson 1
Roots and Elements of Country Music

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 listen to and describe music from contrasting styles.
Students will identify major elements that define a style of music.
Students will list musical characteristics of two contrasting styles of music.
Students will identify the common elements between gospel and bluegrass music.

National Standards:

6 - Listening to, analyzing, and describing music;
9 - Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

Materials

VHS VCR Player

Television

CMT Crossroads program, Sheryl Crow and Willie Nelson (for subsequent lessons)

Audio playback equipment

Web-based lesson materials

Teacher selected recording of music in a style familiar to students other than Country

Soundtrack to *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, produced by T Bone Burnett

Recording of "Po' Lazarus" from the album "Down From the Mountain"

(<http://music.barnesandnoble.com/search/product.asp?ean=8817022123>)

Large pieces of paper (about 3' x 5')

Variety of colored markers,

Overhead projector or chalkboard

Listening guide worksheet

Prior Knowledge: Students understand and use music terminology such as: rhythm, beat, accents, instrumentation, style, melody, harmony, form, bass.

Procedures

1. As students enter the classroom, play the teacher selected recording of a familiar piece of music other than Country. The song should be one the students have previously listened to and discussed in class, classical or contemporary pop, and one with which they identify or have enjoyed learning about in class. It will provide a point of comparison for students, so one in which the instruments, historical context, style, genre, purpose, and form are easily discernible would be best (e.g. segments from fourth movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony are an often studied and discussed piece of music). It is imperative that the students are familiar enough with the piece of music to discuss it with ease.
2. After students are seated, have them describe the piece of music they have just heard. How is it performed, and how many people worked together to perform this piece of music? What instruments do you hear? Is there a specific mood, feeling, or message expressed? Have you heard other pieces of music like this? Where might it come from (country, region), and who is the audience? Who was alive when it was new? How would you classify this piece of music? Ask them to describe it as if they were describing it to a stranger who has never heard it before. (A dedicated colleague or parent may be willing to come in as a "stranger" so the students can describe the piece of music to them.) List students' descriptions on the chalkboard or overhead projector.
3. When the students have described the piece of music in as many ways as possible, direct their attention to the terms they used in their description. Look for words that might define a specific genre of music, and underline them on the board or overhead. Examples of these words include anything relating to the style of the music.

4. Divide the class into groups of three or four students. Distribute a large piece of paper and markers to each group.
5. Instruct students that they are to repeat the same process in their group with an entirely different piece of music. Encourage them to ask each other the same types of questions that you asked them for the first piece of music.
6. Play a recording of “Po’ Lazarus” from the album “Down From the Mountain”. Allow students 2-3 minutes to write their description of the song, and encourage them to write all over the piece of paper, spreading their descriptive words across the paper. To prompt students, remind them of the same questions that were asked for the first piece. Students should describe not just what they hear, but also take note of the historical context or other defining features. Examples regarding “Po’ Lazarus” include: multiple voices in harmony, no instrumental accompaniment, swing rhythm, spiritual subject, stomping of foot as rhythmic accompaniment, somewhat inarticulate vocal style, vocal scoops, vocal drop-off at the end of the phrase. (It is important that the teacher circulate throughout the classroom during this activity and aid any students who are struggling to identify characteristics.)
7. Ask each group to make an educated guess as to the style of “Po’ Lazarus”, and support their argument to the class. Hang students’ work on the wall as a reference for the rest of the lesson.
8. Have students return to their seats, and give them a listening guide with the following questions:
 - What instruments do you hear?
 - Describe the singers’ vocal style.
 - What region of the U.S. do you think this song comes from? Why?
 - How is the lead singer’s style similar to that of “Po’ Lazarus”?
 - How are the back-up vocals similar to those in “Po’ Lazarus”?
 - Who do you think the audience would be of this piece of music?
 - What is the subject of this song? How is it similar to “Po’ Lazarus”?
9. Play “I am a Man of Constant Sorrow”, performed by The Soggy Bottom Boys, from the O Brother, Where Art Thou? soundtrack. (Note that the first version should be used (track #5), not track #16, as it is somewhat slower with fewer instruments, and may be easier for students to analyze.) Have students complete their listening guide.
10. Guide students in a discussion of the styles of the music they have listened to in “Po’ Lazarus” and “I am a Man of Constant Sorrow”. “Po’ Lazarus” is a traditional work song that was one of the major influences on Country music. “I am a Man of Constant Sorrow” is a traditional bluegrass tune. Use the following as needed to enhance the discussion:

Country music is a popular music style that developed in the 1920’s in the United States. It has its origins in not only country dance tunes but also 19th-century popular songs, black-American blues and gospel songs, and sacred numbers. Over a span of 75 years country music has evolved from a folk-derived art form, performed mostly by rural amateurs, into a complex multi-million dollar industry. The earliest country musicians played for country dances, or sang on street corners to earn a living.

-adapted from The New Grove Dictionary of Music Online

Country music developed in the southern states as popular music for the agrarian and working classes. With

influences from songs such as “Po’ Lazarus”, early Country music often took spirituality as a major theme. Over the past 75 years, many genres have developed as branches of Country Music. For example, bluegrass, hillbilly, Cajun, and Western Swing are all subcategories of Country Music.

11. Lead students in a summary discussion of the roots and characteristics of Country music. What is the typical instrumentation and vocal style? What were the main themes or subjects? Who typically listened to the music? Ask them to compare their notes about Country music to the notes made earlier in the lesson pertaining to the “non-Country” song they heard.

12. Inform students that during the next class, they will be introduced to some current performers of Country music who had their roots in the same songs they heard as part of this lesson. Have them give some preliminary thought to the Country music they hear today, focusing on changes in instrumentation, vocal style, subject, changes in listening audience, etc. (For further reinforcement of the students understanding of the roots and elements of Country music, an extension lesson can be created which compares and contrasts examples of contemporary Country music with examples of pieces written earlier.)

Extension: Listening to and discussing the story of the Carter family could provide an interesting backdrop to the start of Country music.

The Carter Family:

American country music group. Its members were Alvin Pleasant Carter (b Maces Spring, VA, 15 Dec 1891; d Maces Spring, 7 Nov 1960), his wife Sara Dougherty Carter (b Flat Woods, VA, 21 July 1898; d Lodi, CA, 8 Jan 1979) and his sister-in-law Maybelle Addington Carter (b nr Nickelsville, Scott Co., VA, 10 May 1909; d Madison, TN, 23 Oct 1978). They lived in Maces Spring, in the Clinch Mountains of Virginia, and made their first recordings in August 1927 for the Victor label; they later signed a contract with the American Record Company, with Columbia and with Decca. By 1943 they had recorded more than 300 sides, but after that year they did not perform together (though A.P. Carter and his children, Janette and Joe, made a few recordings before his death). Maybelle Carter (later known as ‘Mother Maybelle’) continued performing on the ‘Grand Ole Opry’ with her children Helen (b 1927), June (b 1929) and Anita (b 1933) Carter; June Carter married Johnny Cash, and the four women performed on his road and television shows. June’s daughter from an earlier marriage, Carlene, began her career singing with her grandmother but then moved to London and became a rock singer. The Carter Family became the most influential and widely popular country-music singing group in the USA. Their instrumental style, usually consisting only of Maybelle’s melodic line on the guitar underscored by autoharp chords played by Sara, was immediately recognizable and, like their three-part singing, was widely copied. They built up an exceedingly large repertory of Anglo-American folksongs, religious material and sentimental parlour songs; numerous country-music songs still performed (e.g. Wildwood Flower, I’m thinking tonight of my blue eyes and Jimmie Brown the Newsboy) are referred to as ‘Carter Family songs’. Their influence extended to urban youth who learned their songs second- or third-hand, particularly during the folk revival of the late 1950s and early 60s, when the Carter repertory was used by such singers as Joan Baez and Jack Elliott. The original members of the Carter Family group were elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1970.

-from the New Grove Dictionary of Music Online

Lesson One is derived from Strategies for Teaching: Middle-Level and High School Keyboard (MENC: 1996).



These standards-based materials are provided through a partnership with MENC: The National Association for Music Education. This lesson plan provided by MENC member Melissa Harris, Trevor Day School, New York, NY