Learning Activity

Title: Theme and Variation

Description: In this activity, students will learn about theme and variation as a compositional form and put their own spin on a familiar melody through group improvisation.

Grade Level: 9-12
National Music Standards:
1 Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music
3 Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments
4 Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines
6 Listening to, analyzing, and describing music

Background

“Theme and variation” is a popular musical form in which a composer states a melody and then repeats it several times with changes to create more interest and variety. Some famous examples of this form are Charles Ives’ “Variations on America” and Mozart’s “Twelve Variations on Vous dirai-je, Maman” K. 265/300e, a French folk song that most people now know as “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” In this episode 13-year-old Chad Hoopes plays “Variations on La Folia” by Arcangelo Corelli, arranged by Fritz Kreisler. Christopher O’Riley explains that this is one of the most loved melodies of all time, having inspired more variations than any other tune, by composers dating back to the 16th century. In the rehearsal footage, we see Chris and Chad having some fun improvising their own variations, taking requests such as “Airport Jazz Lounge” to put a modern spin on the classic melody.
Materials

Computer with media player and Internet access; speakers and projector if needed; pencils and staff paper

Activity Instructions

1) Begin by singing a very simple melodic phrase, such as do-re-mi-fa-sol. Go around the room and have each student sing the same melody, but change something to give it their own personal twist. Explain to the students that this is an example of the musical form theme and variation, in which there is a starting melody followed by versions of it in which certain musical elements are altered. Have them identify the musical elements they changed to create their own variations (such as pitch, tempo, rhythm, and dynamics) and make a list of these on the board.

2) Tell students that they’re going to see and hear an example of a classical violin piece that uses this form. Watch the video segment that includes Chad’s violin performance, interview and rehearsal footage. Using the list on the board as a reference, ask the students to identify the musical elements they heard altered in the variations. Do they need to add anything else to the list?

3) Talk about style as another way to create variety. The rehearsal footage shows Chris and Chad having some fun improvising new variations of the piece. We hear someone suggest they play it in the style of an airport jazz lounge. Ask the students to identify what musical elements they heard Chad and Chris add or change to do this.

4) Have students brainstorm a list of other famous melodies. Pick one that everyone knows and can sing (like “Happy Birthday”).

5) Now have the students generate a list of different musical styles or scenarios (such as opera, rap, and folk) and write these on the board. Have the students improvise their own versions of the melody in one of these styles and perform their variation for their classmates. Ask the students to identify what musical elements they altered to reflect that new style.

Extra Credit! For more advanced music students: Select a favorite melody and compose three short variations that reflect different styles or moods. Students should take into account choice of instrument(s), style and the musical elements identified in class.
Find out more!

**About Chad Hoopes**
In addition to being featured on a recent television commercial for the Cleveland Indians, Chad has also appeared on our radio program with his two sisters in their family trio, The Playing Hoopes. You can read more about him and his musical family here:
http://www.fromthetop.org/Programs/Performers.cfm?eid=313

**About La Folia**
La Folia is described as “the most lasting and famous tune in western music.” Check out this website for more information about the history of this tune and how it has been used by hundred of musicians around the world!
http://members.chello.nl/folia/index.html