

What Inspires a Composer

For 5th-8th grades



Lesson 3 — A Composer's Inspiration

Objective

Using a variety of repertoire from the BPO concert, students will explore composers' inspiration behind the music. Through four different musical selections, students will understand that composers draw inspiration from people, artwork, dance, and social movements. Students will write about what inspires them and what medium they may use to express their inspiration.

Suggested Materials

- Audio recordings
 - o MODEST MUSSORGSKY "Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks" from *Pictures at an Exhibition* 
 - o WILLIAM GRANT STILL *Danzas de Panama*, No. 2 
 - o GEORGE GERSHWIN "Someone to Watch Over Me" 
 - o MILAD YOUSUFI "Freedom" 
 - o Behind the Music excerpts (provided)

New York State Arts Standards

MU:Re7.1.5a-8a MU:Re8.1.5a-8a MU:Re9.1.5a-8a
MU:Re7.2.5a
MU:Re7.2.6b-8b

New York State English Language Arts & Literacy Standards

Reading, Standards 1, 2 & 7
Writing, Standards 3 & 4
Speaking & Listening, Standards 1, 2, 4 & 6
Language, Standards 1, 3, 4 & 6

New York State Social Studies Standards

Standard 1: History of the United States and New York
Standard 2: World History
Standard 3: Geography

Procedure

- 1) What inspires a composer to create music? Sometimes it is something in the natural world, or it could be a story, a piece of art, or even a social justice movement. In this lesson we will explore where four different composers drew inspiration from to create their musical works.
 - a) Artwork as inspiration: Mussorgsky's "Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks" from *Pictures at an Exhibition*
 - b) Dance as inspiration: Still's *Danzas de Panama*, No. 2
 - c) People as inspiration: Gershwin's "Someone to Watch Over Me"
 - d) Social movement as inspiration: Yousufi's "Freedom"
- 2) Have students break into four groups and select one of the Behind the Music excerpts to read and listen to the corresponding audio recording. After listening, have each group share what they noticed about the music and how musical elements reflect the inspiration behind the music.
- 3) Ask students to write about something that inspires them. How might they express their inspiration? Would they choose to express the inspiration through music, painting, dance, etc.?

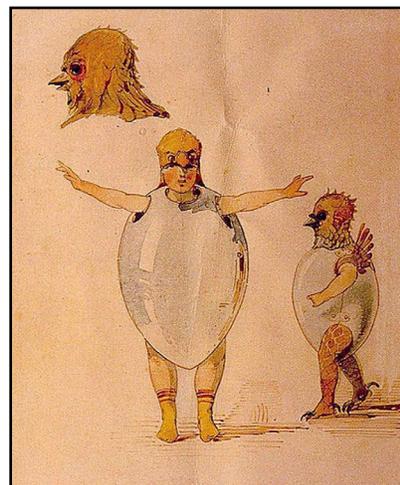
Lesson 3 — A Composer's Inspiration (continued)

BEHIND THE MUSIC

“Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks” from *Pictures at an Exhibition*

by Modest Mussorgsky

Pictures at an Exhibition was originally composed in 1874 as a piano suite in ten movements by composer Modest Mussorgsky. It is a musical depiction of a tour of an exhibition of works by Russian architect and painter Viktor Hartmann. Each movement is a musical illustration of an individual work of art by Hartmann. The fifth movement, “Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks,” was inspired by Hartmann’s watercolor painting of theatre costumes he designed for the children’s ballet, *Trilby*, at the Maryinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia. In the cast were several boy and girl students from the theatre school, dressed as canaries; others were dressed in egg outfits with chick heads poking out of the shells. The movement is very fast and upbeat, representing young chicks bouncing around their nest.



Danzas de Panama No. 2

by William Grant Still

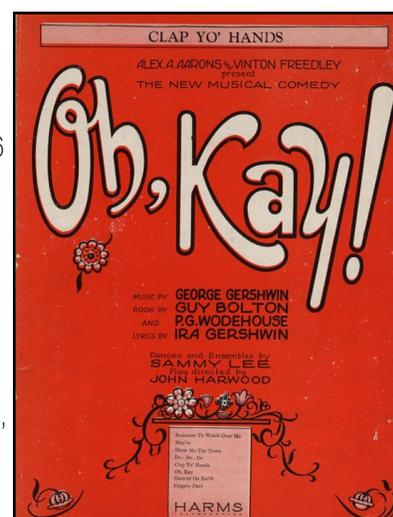
Composed in 1948, William Grant Still’s *Danzas de Panama* are based on a collection of Panamanian folk dances compiled by American violinist Elisabeth Waldo in the 1920s. Still was inspired to write his own “Danzas de Panama” after listening to the traditional Panamanian folk dance music collected by ethnomusicologist Elisabeth Waldo. An ethnomusicologist is a person who studies and collects music from around the world. There is distinct Caribbean color in all four dances, while the second dance is of Spanish-Indian origin. Each movement reflects several different dances. The second movement, “Mejorana y Socavon”, sounds like a carefree Panamanian waltz, followed by a somewhat ominous dance.



“Someone to Watch Over Me”

by George Gershwin
lyrics by Ira Gershwin

“Someone to Watch Over Me” was written by composer George Gershwin in 1926 with lyrics by Ira Gershwin. Written by Ira for his wife Leonore in commemoration of their marriage on September 14, 1926, it is considered one of the Gershwins’ most iconic songs. The song made its Broadway debut in the hit musical *Oh, Kay!* (1926). *Oh, Kay!* was a wildly popular love story, with “Someone to Watch Over Me” being the show’s big hit. George had originally composed the music as “another dance-and-ensemble number” for the show. One day, George started playing the piece on piano at a slower tempo and both he and Ira realized the song wasn’t really a rhythm/dance tune, but rather a wistful and warm one. The tempo change enhanced Ira’s sentimental lyrics for the music, and the composers’ aim to capture the feeling of safety and love that everybody longs to have.



Lesson 3 — A Composer's Inspiration (continued)

“Someone to Watch Over Me” lyrics:

There's a saying old says that love is blind
Still we're often told *“seek and ye shall find”*
So I'm going to seek a certain girl I've had in mind
Looking everywhere, haven't found her yet
She's the big affair I cannot forget
Only girl I ever think of with regret

I'd like to add her initials to my monogram
Tell me where's the shepherd for this lost lamb

There's somebody I'm longing to see
I hope that she turns out to be
Someone to watch over me

I'm a little lamb who's lost in a wood
I know I could always be good
To one who'll watch over me

Although I may not be the man some girls think of
As handsome
To my heart she carries the key

Won't you tell her please to put on some speed
Follow my lead, oh how I need
Someone to watch over me
Someone to watch over me

“FREEDOM”

by Milad Yousufi

“Freedom” was commissioned in 2022 by New York Philharmonic's Very Young Composer's Program. Inspired by the world refugee crisis, “Freedom” represents the effects of the war in Afghanistan, and, in the middle of the piece, hope. There is a sense of anxiety in the music that expresses the anxiety and depression that many refugees experience. Composer Milad Yousufi's works express his complex feelings toward his birth country- feeling abandoned, and yet longing to return to it.

