

## **Gracie Abrams: Made for the Moment**

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

Having successful and influential parents can be a double-edged sword. While some manage to leverage their family name and create their own success, many children born into upper echelon families of those in the entertainment industry fall prey to the excesses and pitfalls of wealth and fame. Thankfully, only the former applies to Gracie Abrams, daughter of TV and film titans J.J. Abrams and Katie McGrath. With her heartfelt lyrics and captivating vocal stylings, Abrams is establishing herself as a pop tour de force. With a stable of A-list producers and collaborators, as well as the seal of approval from the biggest pop star on the planet (you know who we mean), Abrams seems poised for enduring success.

### **Prepare**

Ask students if any of them are familiar with Gracie Abrams' music, and if so, how they first learned of her. Though her fanbase was already growing rapidly through streaming services and her engaging Instagram and Tiktok presences, her biggest leap in exposure came recently with her opening slot on the record-breaking Eras Tour. Ask students who are fans of her music what they enjoy about it and why they think she stands out among other singer songwriters and popstars in her genre. Read the article individually or together as a class.

*Key points in the article:*

- Though she comes from a multi-generational entertainment industry lineage, Abrams' music and talent speak for themselves. Where many similarly-privileged young artists have failed to establish a lasting fanbase, Abrams' captivating songs, thoroughly of-the-moment sound, and intimate fan engagement on TikTok and other social platforms have garnered her a devoted following and undeniable industry credibility.
- Abrams' success is due in part to her ability to select producers and collaborators that share her vision and bring out the best in her sound. Heavyweight producers like Aaron Dessner and Blake Slatkin have helped her create soundscapes and textures that highlight her emotive vocal stylings on both of her full length studio albums.
- As if critical praise and fan adoration wasn't enough, Abrams has also earned the endorsement of none other than Taylor Swift, who she claims as a big influence on her writing. Abrams gained exposure with Swift's massive fanbase as an opener on the Eras Tour, which has gone on to become the highest-grossing tour of all time.

## **Begin**

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Poignant:** evoking a keen sense of sadness or regret
- **Cohesive:** united and working together effectively
- **Transparency:** the quality of being easy to perceive or detect
- **Symbiotic:** denoting a mutually beneficial relationship between different people or groups
- **Endear:** cause to be loved or liked

## **Discuss**

After reading the article, ask students if they knew her parents were highly influential figures in the entertainment industry. Does that change their view of her success? Do they agree with the author's assessment that industry connections are only valuable if the artist possesses the talent and drive to capitalize on them? Next, watch Abrams' performance of her single "Risk" on The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon. Do students hear echoes of her Taylor Swift influence? If so, how do their styles differ? Why do students think Swift is "passing the torch" on to Abrams as a representative of the next generation of pop music?

## **Q&A**

1. Which prominent producer is featured on both of Abrams' albums?
2. What is the name of the TV and film production company Abrams' parents serve as co-CEOs?
3. Which prominent magazines have featured Abrams on the cover??
4. Which superstar artist brought Abrams on tour as an opener as a "pass of the torch?"
5. Which elements of Abrams' distinct style help set her apart from peers like Lorde and Billie Eilish?

## **Answers**

1. Aaron Dessner of the band The National
2. Bad Robot Productions
3. *Rolling Stone*, *Billboard*, and *Vogue*
4. Taylor Swift
5. A minimalist sound/stripped-down production approach

## **Expand**

As noted in the article, many children of entertainment industry stars attempt their own career in music (some more successfully than others). Have students search for other musical artists with

famous families and select one for a research project. Students' research can take the form of an essay, in-class presentation with visual aids, or both. The project can be given to students individually or as randomly assigned groups. Students should include a timeline of their selected artist/songwriter's career, their major accomplishments, any recognizable songs, and a comparison to Gracie Abrams' career trajectory.

## **What's A Plug-In**

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

As any music producer, mixing engineer, or independent artist can tell you, a good collection of plug-ins is essential for modern music production. The type of sound alterations that used to require large hardware units, such as rack-mounted processors, can now be done with convenient digital tools. If you can identify the types of sounds that best suit your musical style and production process, you can find an endless array of plug-ins to meet those needs. Whether you purchase individual units, a large bundle, or a subscription service, it is easier than ever to acquire powerful sound editing tools that can take your songs and mixes to the next level.

### **Prepare**

Ask students if they have used a digital audio workstation (DAW) to record music before. Even free DAWs like Garageband contain a wide array of included plug-ins, making it likely that students have at least dabbled in the aforementioned sound sculpting tools. If a significant portion of the class is new to production and unfamiliar with the use of plug-ins, conduct a demonstration on a school computer to show how plug-ins are applied to a channel strip within the DAW (or if there are no available computers with DAWs installed, find a YouTube tutorial on plug-in basics to play for the class).

*Key points in the article:*

- The advent of plug-ins brought about a new era of sonic possibilities for musicians and producers of all levels. The options for plug-in brands are virtually endless, as are the sound shaping possibilities their products offer. Starting your plug-in collection is as easy as browsing youtube or reddit to see what like-minded musicians are using.
- A good way to identify your ideal plug-ins is to identify your own musical needs based on different stages of the production process. For instance, if you are an EDM producer who mostly uses sampled sounds and digital instruments, you will likely not need an arsenal of EQs or other early-stage correctional tools. You might be better served by investing in good mastering plug-ins to reduce costs and maintain control over your entire mixing/mastering process.
- Although the price tag on some plug-ins might be intimidating, there are many ways to save money and access quality software. Besides having frequent sales, most companies offer bundles of plug-ins at a greatly reduced cost or a subscription service that allows

access to an entire library of plug-ins for a low monthly fee.

### **Begin**

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Mastering:** the final balancing of sonic elements in a track using tools such as equalization, compression, limiting, and stereo enhancement
- **Modulation:** the quality of an audio effect changing the property of sound over time
- **Interface:** an audio device that connects your computer to musical instruments, microphones, and other audio equipment
- **Innovative:** introducing new ideas; original and creative in thinking
- **Networking:** the action or process of interacting with others to exchange information and develop professional or social contacts

### **Discuss**

After reading the article, ask if any students have used or purchased plug-ins that did not come stock with their DAW and why they chose that particular plug-in/bundle/subscription service. Did they have needs that stock plug-ins did not fill? Did their chosen plug-in execute the desired function more effectively, offer additional options, or increased ease of use? Discuss whether they organize their purchases according to the stages of a mix outlined in the article. If not, would they consider supplementing their plug-in collection to be equally strong in the early, mid, and late stages of a mix?

### **Q&A**

1. Why do musicians and producers buy new plug-ins if there are stock versions already available in their DAW?
2. Which online forum does the article mention as a resource for learning about plug-ins?
3. What is the benefit of using subscription services like Slate Digital, LANDR and Splice?
4. What is the major advantage of buying a plug-in bundle?
5. When buying plug-ins, it is important to check if they are compatible with your \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

### **Answers**

1. Stock sounds and effects that come with digital audio workstations (DAWs) often lack the depth and character that high-quality plug-ins offer
2. r/audioengineering
3. They offer access to a wide range of plug-ins on a trial basis, allowing you to experiment with different tools before committing to a purchase
4. Cost efficiency
5. DAW/operating system

## **Expand**

This exercise can be done in a school computer lab with any DAW (free or otherwise) installed, but in the absence of those resources, it can also be completed as an independent/group research project.

Have students/groups select an effect listed in the numbered section of the article (from early, mid, late, or final stage of the mixing process). If your school has computers with DAWs installed, have the students get accustomed with the stock version of their chosen effect (if no computer lab is available, choose a DAW such as Logic and have students look up YouTube tutorials on the stock version of their effect). Make a list of the features and controls available in the stock plug-in. Next, instruct students to research popular plug-ins that contain the same effect online. They can use online forums or marketplaces listed in the article to find recommendations.

Have students select one option, note the price, and make a list of features in the plug-in. Students will then write out a comparison between the stock and aftermarket versions of their chosen effect and list the best-price option for how to acquire it (as an individual unit, in a bundle, or through a subscription). Have students/groups share their choices and findings with the class.

## **How To Play No Doubt’s “Just A Girl”**

National Standards: 1-9

In Tune’s “How To Play” feature has recently explored the many phases of ska music, the Jamaican genre that spawned reggae and other styles in the Western music lexicon. One of the more recent American offshoots of the genre, known as Third-Wave Ska, rose to prominence in the 90s thanks to bands like No Doubt. The high energy, no-frills approach behind their breakout single “Just A Girl” allows the vocals and impactful lyrics to shine. Due to the relatively minimalist arrangement and thrilling dynamics of the arrangement, “Just A Girl” is an excellent choice for a young ensemble to cover.

### **Prepare**

Play “Just A Girl” for the class in its entirety and have them take notes on what they hear. This can be anything from lyrical themes to instruments to notes on the overall style and sound. Ask students if they are familiar with the song or Third Wave Ska in general and talk about the fundamentals of the genre. Then, play other examples of Third Wave Ska (Reel Big Fish’s “Sell Out” and Goldfinger’s “Superman” are good choices) and have students take notes again. What similarities and differences do they hear? After hearing several examples of the genre, do students feel they have a clear idea of the sound of Third Wave Ska?

*Key points in the article:*

- “Just A Girl” builds momentum with clever use of double time, sparse verses, and guitar/bass parts that support each other and never overplay. Paying close attention to when each instrument comes to the forefront and when they sit back will help students nail the dynamics of this high energy anthem.
- As stated in the article, the record has “no fat on it,” meaning there are no extra sounds or layers to hide behind. Every instrument in the mix is there for a purpose and leaves when that purpose has been fulfilled, like the synth parts that play only in certain sections. This simplicity is crucial to the aggressive sound of the record.
- To capture this type of energy in their own music, encourage students to visualize how the song gets from its lowest point to the peak of its energy. For the biggest parts of the song to stand out, other sections of the song have to be lower dynamically. They don’t have to be quiet, but there always needs to be room to grow in energy and volume.

## **Begin**

*Review Vocabulary words from the article below:*

- **Downbeats:** The first beat of a measure
- **Backbeats:** Beats two and four in a measure (in a 4/4 time signature)
- **Economy:** careful management of available resources
- **Incremental:** occurring in especially small increments
- **Sparse:** small in numbers or amount, often spread over a large area

## **Discuss**

After reading the article, listen to the song as a class again, paying close attention to the rhythm section. Notice when the drums play in half time and when they switch to double time, noting how that shift affects the dynamics. Notice when the bass is locked with the kick drum and when it plays eighth notes. On the next listen, shift focus to the guitars and synthesizers. When are the guitars playing palm-muted single note lines and when are they strumming power chords? How do those differences affect the overall sound? In which sections does the synth play and when does it go quiet? Why do students think they left synth out of those parts?

## **Q&A**

1. Why does syncing the bass part with the kick drum create such a powerful pulse?
2. What was the title on No Doubt's third album?
3. How does the second chorus differ from the first?
4. When do the drums in "Just A Girl" first shift into double time?
5. What other famous genre of Jamaican music was a development of ska?

## **Answers**

1. It drives the feel strongly but still leaves plenty of space for everyone else
2. "Tragic Kingdom"
3. It's actually a chorus and a half (to accommodate the evolving lyric)
4. The first chorus
5. Reggae

## **Expand**

Once students have analyzed the song as a class discussion, have each ensemble member learn their part before the next class/rehearsal. Guitar players can use the video link at the end of the story to learn the main riff.

On the first few playthroughs, focus on the changes and make sure band members know the form of the song inside and out. After all, it's impossible to focus on dynamic builds if band members don't remember which part of the song they are building up to next. In a song that shifts back and forth between soft, loud, and in-between as frequently as "Just A Girl," it is crucial to anticipate what is coming next.

Next, focus on the more nuanced challenges of the song. For instance, it is easy for young musicians to rush in double time sections and drag in half time sections. Any shift in the tempo will hurt the momentum and continuity of the song, so it is important to keep it consistent. One option is to have students practice to a metronome (this works best if the metronome can be played through a monitor system, either floor wedges or in-ear monitors, to make sure the band can hear it clearly). If that is not an option, the director of the ensemble can either clap or use hand motions to help steer the band back on tempo if they drift.

Once the form and tempo of the song are second nature to the band, put the final touches on the cover by getting the whole band to focus on the vocalist's performance (a great habit for any backing musician to develop). Encourage them to assess their playing in real time through questions like "Am I matching the vocalist's intensity?" Or, "Is my playing leaving enough room for the vocals to shine?" Developing these listening skills and real-time critical evaluation abilities will take your ensemble to the next level, and audiences will respond accordingly.

## **Mode Mobility**

National Standards: 1-9

A solid understanding of modes can open new sonic worlds for musicians, whether using them as an extension of the standard major and minor scales or as harmonic worlds unto themselves. Though modes have many different definitions and interpretations depending on region and time period, the traditional understanding of modes in Western music theory is the one modern musicians are likely to find most applicable. Becoming fluent in the different modes of the major and minor scale can help composers and soloists alike in their quest for new sounds and should therefore take high priority for young musicians.

### **Prepare**

To introduce the concept of modes, ask the class to raise their hands if they know how to play the major scale and minor scale. Depending on the level of the class, most hands in the room should raise. Follow up by asking them to keep their hands raised if they know how to play the Ionian mode and Aeolian mode. If any hands drop, tell them that the terms are synonymous. From there, ask for a show of hands if students know any other modes. If the topic of modes is new to most or all of the class, inform them that they already know the notes of every diatonic mode if they know the major and minor scale. All that's left is to learn the order of those notes and the names that go with them. Read the article as a class or individually.

*Key points in the article:*

- The understanding of modes from which the article relies upon is the traditional definition in Western music theory, meaning it is closely related to the idea of keys. All seven diatonic modes are made up of the same seven notes inherent to the key signature. Although that makes it easier to learn all the modes in any given key, it makes it slightly murkier for students to understand their purpose and implementation. Patience is key (no pun intended).
- Vocalist or not, singing is a great way to internalize the sounds and intervals of each mode. It requires the student to hear the note in their head before they make the sound, rather than simply remembering the physical shapes of the modes on their instrument. While both are important, it is often simpler to teach the fingers to follow the ears as opposed to the reverse approach.
- Modes can be generally classified as major-adjacent or minor-adjacent by determining which type of triad the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> degrees of the mode create. Ionian, Mixolydian, and Lydian all form a major triad starting from the first degree of the mode, whereas Aeolian, Dorian, and Phrygian form minor triads from the first degree. Locrian is the odd one out, since its 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> degrees combine to form a diminished triad (though it can be reasonably grouped in with the minor-adjacent modes due to the flat 3<sup>rd</sup>).

## **Begin**

*Review Vocabulary words from the article below:*

- **Diatonic:** any stepwise arrangement of the seven “natural” pitches (scale degrees) forming an octave without altering the established pattern of a key or mode
- **Interchangeable:** able to be interchanged, very similar
- **Savor:** to enjoy an experience slowly and intentionally; to enjoy as much as possible
- **Transposition:** the act of changing the pitches of a musical work, but not altering the relationships between these pitches; creating an identical note sequence in a different key
- **Sublime:** of such excellence, grandeur, or beauty as to inspire great admiration or awe

## **Discuss**

One of the major advantages of modal playing is being able to add different melodic textures and colors without clashing with a standard major/minor harmonic backdrop. After reading the article, make sure students can identify which modes sound major-ish and which sound minor-ish. Then, after hearing the examples, ask students for adjectives to describe the different emotional qualities of each major mode (i.e. Lydian’s “yearning” quality and Mixolydian’s “funky” sound) and discuss how/when these modes could be substituted for traditional major/Ionian. Repeat with the minor modes.

## **Q&A**

1. True or False: Modern Western modes are identical to the ancient Greek modes that share their names.
2. What type of triad is formed by the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> degree of the Locrian mode?
3. What is the definition of a mode given in the article?
4. Why is it beneficial to practice singing the modes, even for instrumentalists?
5. Which mode contains a flat 2<sup>nd</sup>?

## **Answers**

1. False
2. Diminished
3. “A collection of notes that makes up a type of scale, whether drawn from our most common major or minor scales or not”
4. It helps to savor the unique flavors of each mode, which will greatly speed up the learning process
5. Phrygian

### **Expand**

Though the Western classical concept of modes is very practical for modern musicians, it can be just as valuable to explore different forms of modes from other cultures and time periods. Assign students a research project about an alternative modal concept- offer a choice between the examples listed in the article (Arabic maqam and Javanese Gamelan) or any other historical example students can find (Byzantine Octoechos and Indian classical Raga are other good options). Require a thorough summary of the music theory and cultural significance of their chosen modal system, along with a video/audio example that can be shared with the class as a presentation. Bonus points if students can demonstrate their chosen modal concept on their instrument of choice!