

Wickedly Popular

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

The enduring legacy of *The Wizard of Oz* has led to multiple popular spin-offs and reinterpretations. Chief among them is the modern Broadway classic *Wicked*, now the second-highest grossing musical in history. Now, the long-awaited film adaptation of *Wicked*, starring pop icon Ariana Grande and Tony winner Cynthia Erivo, has finally hit theatres to rave reviews.

Perhaps the greatest testament to the power and popularity of the movie's soundtrack is the fact that some theatres have had to ban audiences from singing along (or at least schedule designated sing-along screenings of the film). Now a certifiable cultural phenomenon, the story behind the creation of *Wicked* is perfect for classroom discussion.

Prepare

Now that it has been in production for over 22 years, multiple generations of musical theater students and aspiring thespians can attest to the cultural importance of *Wicked*. As if that wasn't impressive enough, with the major motion picture adaptation dominating entertainment news cycles for much of 2024, *Wicked* has now become a cultural touchstone for the entire moviegoing public.

By a show of hands, ask the class how many of them could recite the first line of "Defying Gravity" from memory. Then, ask how many in the class have seen a production of *Wicked*, either on Broadway, a touring production, a school production, or the new film. Ask for volunteers to share their experience with *Wicked* and whether they enjoyed it. Play the film soundtrack version of "Defying Gravity" in its entirety for the class, and then read the In Tune article.

Key points in the article:

- Gregory Maguire, author of the book upon which *Wicked* is based, had originally sold the rights to Universal for a film adaptation. Steven Schwartz, creator of many celebrated Broadway musicals, encountered the book in 1995 and immediately saw the potential for a stage adaptation. His passion for the project convinced Maguire and Universal to release the rights for a stage production.
- The new film adaptation of *Wicked* is a major milestone in the career of its star, Cynthia Erivo. Already an accomplished stage and screen actor, Erivo holds a special place in her heart for *Wicked* and her character Elphaba. Seeing a production of *Wicked* at age 25, Erivo identifies deeply with the story and character.
- Fortunately for director Jon Chu and the makers of the film, Erivo and her costar Ariana Grande had immediate chemistry. Their first meeting resulted in the pair talking for five hours, and singing together in their first rehearsal was equally inspiring. Their voices and personalities worked in perfect harmony, and the two have become friendly off stage as well.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Rendition:** a performance or interpretation, especially of a dramatic role or piece of music
- **Libretto:** the text of an opera or other long vocal work
- **Crystallize:** make or become definite and clear
- **Exponential:** (of an increase) becoming more and more rapid
- **Propaganda:** information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view

Discuss

Now that the class has heard the film version of “Defying Gravity” featuring Cynthia Erivo, play the original cast soundtrack version of the song performed by Idina Menzel. Compare the two versions and ask the class for their thoughts on both versions. How do Erivo and Menzel’s interpretations differ in terms of vocal performance? How do they differ in the portrayal of the character? Whose version does the class prefer? After comparing the two, conduct a class discussion about why the music of *Wicked* has been so enduringly successful. Why does it stand out among other musicals? What gives it such emotional impact for so many people?

Q&A

1. Which Broadway production earned Cynthia Erivo her first Tony and Grammy?
2. How long did Ariana Grande and Cynthia Erivo end up talking when they first met?
3. When did *Wicked* make its debut in New York City?
4. Gregory Maguire, original author of *Wicked*, originally sold the film rights to which studio?
5. True or False: *Wicked* is the highest-grossing musical in history.

Answers

1. The Color Purple
2. Five Hours
3. October 30th, 2003
4. Universal
5. False (it is 2nd highest)

Expand

For an individual assignment, have students select any song from the original *Wicked* soundtrack and compare it to the film soundtrack version. Note which actor is singing each version and compare their vocal delivery and emotional inflections. Additionally, consider the musical arrangement of each version. How does the production style and instrumentation of each version differ? How are they the same? Why do students think the film composers deviated in the ways they did? Which version do they prefer, if any? Comparisons can be made either as an essay or in-class presentation.

Becoming An Independent Artist

National Standards: 1-9

The term “indie” gets thrown around a lot these days. It can describe the sound/genre of a piece of music, a visual aesthetic, or any number of stylistic applications. The original term, however, refers to the independent status of a musical artist, meaning they maintain a performing career without the financial and logistical support of a record label or talent agency. How does one go from a hobbyist musician to an independent musician that makes part (or all!) of their income from their music? Utilizing the many tools available to modern indie artists can make the difference between wallowing in obscurity and achieving lifelong goals.

Prepare

Ask if anyone in class has aspirations to play music professionally. Additionally, ask if anyone in class has performed their own music live or released music digitally. With the widespread availability of home recording software, more young artists are writing and releasing music than ever before. This ease has created a highly saturated market for musicians, however. Of those in class who responded to the previous questions, what services did they use to book performances or get digital distribution for their music? Do any of them have a plan for how to start generating revenue through their music (or have they already started doing so)? After discussing these introductory questions, read the article individually or as a class.

Key points in the article:

- Making the jump from hobbyist to independent artist requires a musician to become “commercially viable.” Everyone has a different definition of success, and therefore, achieving success requires a clear list of goals and a plan to make at least partial income from music and performance. While both are perfectly viable ways to engage with music, independent musicians seek more than just their personal satisfaction through music.
- While the music industry is constantly changing, there are a few requirements for starting a music career that remain constant. Any independent musician will need recordings of their music, a website, and a presence on social media. The process of booking gigs, getting playlist placement for songs, and engaging potential fans all rely on these touchstones.
- Though the learning curve for managing the digital aspects of a musical career is continually getting steeper, there are more resources than ever for the crucial aspects of an artist’s online presence. Companies like Distrokid offer everything from digital distribution to mastering services, making it simpler than ever to get recordings ready for streaming and available on all platforms. Services like Bandzoogle offer easy templates for artist websites and plenty of tutorials for making a compelling and functional website. Utilizing these tools can make a world of difference for indie artists.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Viable:** capable of working successfully; feasible
- **Repertoire:** a stock of plays, dances, or pieces that a company or a performer knows or is prepared to perform
- **Meticulous:** showing great attention to detail; very careful and precise
- **Cohesion:** the action or fact of forming a united whole
- **Merchandise:** The commodities or goods that are bought and sold in business

Discuss

After reading the article, ask students if they learned of any tools or services for advancing a music career that they were not previously aware of. Do any students have experience with companies listed in the article, such as bandzoogle, distrokid, sonicbids, or reverbnation? Did they achieve their desired results from using it?

Discuss the modern environment for creating an independent music career with the class. Do students feel empowered by the tools available for them to help themselves, or are they overwhelmed by the prospect of self-management and promotion? If the latter, what steps could they take based on the information in the article to ease that stress and focus on making music?

O&A

1. What does “digital distribution” refer to?
2. What is mastering?
3. What does an independent artist’s website need?
4. What is the difference between hobbyists and emerging independent artists?
5. What are some websites that can help artists connect with venues and event organizers?

Answers

1. Streaming platforms like Spotify, Apple, Youtube, and TikTok.
2. The final step in audio production, ensuring that your song will sound polished, balanced, and be ready for distribution.
3. A design, a domain name and registration, and a host, as well as have the functionality to support your goals.
4. A commitment to become "commercially viable"
5. GigSalad, Bandsintown, and ReverbNation

Expand

As a helpful exercise, have students create a hypothetical (or real!) plan to launch a career as an independent artist. The plan should address the following subheadings from the article:

Recording your Music- Would students use their own software and equipment to record their music, or would they opt to pay for professional recording services? If self-recording, list the DAW, microphones, instruments, etc, they would use. If paying for a professional, select a real studio in the area and note the price. What are the advantages and disadvantages inherent to the chosen method?

Distributing Your Recordings- How would students get their music on streaming services? How much does their chosen distribution service cost and why did they select it over other options? How does their distributor handle royalties and payouts? Are there any other added benefits of using their chosen distribution service?

Creating a Website- There are many online platforms for building a website. Have students select the one they prefer and compare the pricing and options to other services. What features and information would they have on their site and why?

Getting Gigs- How would students book live performances? Determine the types of venues that would be appropriate for their style of music, keeping in mind their status as a new independent artist (certainly not stadiums and amphitheaters). After listing 5 local/regional events or venues they think would fit their music, list how they would approach the venue to book.

Promoting Your Music- What strategies would students follow to help their music get traction online and generate streams? Which social media platforms would be most important for promotion? Would they opt for any paid services? How would they attempt to get playlist placement?

For bonus points, students can create a timeline for their career launch plan. Include potential recording dates, release dates for music, where/when they would perform live, and how they would promote each of these aspects on social media.

Additive Rhythms

National Standards: 1-9

Nearly every style of Western popular music is rooted in 4/4 time, with repeating rhythmic phrases that fit neatly within its boundaries. This can make it difficult to approach odd time signatures, or even asymmetrical patterns within 4/4 time. Thankfully, the concept of additive rhythm can help musicians break out of the conventional rhythms and time feel and explore long, spiraling passages of music. Whether using it as a tool to analyze a complex piece of music or to compose your own, the concept of additive rhythm can add variety and depth to any musician's skillset.

Prepare

The beauty of additive rhythm lies in its inherent simplicity. With this approach, complex pieces of music can be broken down into (or composed with) simple, digestible patterns. Counting bars and beats is unnecessary, which makes it an inviting way for young musicians to explore the off-kilter sounds of odd groupings.

To make the article most understandable, lead a quick class review of the necessary concepts, including beat subdivisions and note values, but don't worry if the class is unfamiliar with odd time signatures. All that is necessary in order to absorb the concepts in the article is the ability to read quarter notes and eighth notes.

Key points in the article:

- Additive rhythm is the concept of taking small rhythmic units and combining them into longer musical passages without worrying about fitting them into a set meter. Musicians often talk about phrases that go "over the bar lines," and additive rhythm is a quick way to create rhythms that do just that. It also provides an easier entry into complex rhythms, since small pieces can be learned individually and then placed into the larger context of the music.
- When first exploring this rhythmic concept, using a single, static note simplifies the process. More melody notes can be added later, but absorbing the rhythm is most important. Once comfortable with stringing together several rhythmic groupings into a larger pattern, it is possible to examine how these odd groupings work within the familiar confines of 4/4 time.
- After learning to play and compose with additive rhythm and applying it to standard time, it is possible to explore odd-numbered groupings and apply odd meters to fit the phrases. Additionally, odd phrases can be understood through meter changes. There can be many ways of conceptualizing and writing the rhythms that result from this compositional process, but the important part is expanding students' ears and stretching their perception of rhythm.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Compelling:** evoking interest, attention, or admiration powerfully irresistible way
- **Cadence:** a sequence of notes or chords comprising the close of a musical phrase
- **Imbue:** inspire or permeate with a feeling or quality
- **Divisive Rhythm:** the musical practice of taking longer blocks of time and breaking them into smaller divisions
- **Cultivate:** to acquire or develop a quality, sentiment, or skill

Discuss

After reading the article, offer students the opportunity to hear or play the sounds in each example. If a piano lab is available, allow students a few minutes for each example to play through each example on their own, pausing between sections to allow time for questions and demonstrate the rhythms if necessary. Ask for volunteers to demonstrate each example and offer corrections. After students have had time to absorb each example, lead a discussion about the class' experience with additive rhythm. Were they able to internalize the feel of the more complex examples? Was it freeing not to worry about keeping their place in the measure, or did they miss having the structure? Is this something students can see as a tool for their own future compositions?

Q&A

1. True or false: Divisive rhythm is the practice of building longer blocks by connecting smaller rhythmic units.
2. According to the article, rhythm is the _____ in which sounds repeat that give us a feeling of flow.
3. When learning the examples of additive rhythm, it is important to “focus on counting the rhythms with the tempo and let go of the idea of _____.”
4. True or false: We often think of rhythms in relation to musical meter-repeating groups of beats that add up to measures of music.
5. What does additive rhythm focus on instead of meter?

Answers

1. False
2. Cadence
3. Which beat of the measure you are on
4. True
5. Rhythms and tempo or pulse

Expand

Assign a composition project for students, either to be completed by groups in class or individually at home, depending on the resources available to the class. Students should compose a short piece of music using additive rhythm and the concepts used in the article. If setting a required length for the compositions, consider measuring it in seconds instead of measures (i.e. a 45 second composition, as opposed to an eight measure composition). This should help keep the focus on feeling the rhythmic units instead of getting bogged down counting beats and measures. For advanced classes, the assignment might require both a melody and chordal accompaniment, but an unaccompanied melody is sufficient as a simpler assignment for younger classes.

Exploring the Accordion: An Instrument of Global Resonance

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

Distinctive in its sound, construction, and playability, the accordion is an instantly recognizable sound. Though its origins can be traced back over 3,000 years, the most recognizable predecessor of the accordion took shape in 19th-century Europe. Throughout centuries of development, the accordion has evolved into many different variations and found a home in myriad styles around the world. To celebrate this often under-appreciated staple of global music, trace the accordion's rich heritage with your students.

Prepare

Play an audio clip of an accordion for the class and ask if they can identify what instrument is playing. Even though it is not often heard in the Billboard Top 40, the sound of the accordion has found a home in enough musical styles around the globe that students will likely recognize it right away. Ask students if anyone in the room plays the accordion (or knows anyone who does), and if so, why they chose to learn the instrument. Ask students if they listen to any music that features the accordion and if they can recommend any accordion-heavy songs to the class. After listening to a few examples, read the article individually or as a class.

Key points in the article:

- The accordion as we know it was first invented by Christian Friedrich Bushmann in 1822, and shortly after patented by Austrian instrument maker Cyrill Demian in 1829. The original version featured buttons that played entire chords, making it ideal for amateur musicians to accompany folk songs. Different versions over the years saw the inclusion of a wider range, a piano like keyboard, and expanded dynamic range.
- Most accordions fall into two categories: Diatonic and Chromatic. Diatonic are often associated with folk music traditions and are more limited in their harmonic capabilities. Chromatic accordions feature a full chromatic scale and are therefore more versatile than their counterparts, able to play in any key.
- Playing the accordion is a combination of technical skill and intuition. With a surprisingly wide range of expressive capabilities and plenty of flashy techniques to embellish melodies, the accordion can be a surprisingly difficult instrument to master.

Begin

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Indelible:** not able to be forgotten or removed
- **Integrate:** to combine one thing with another to form a whole

- **Intuition:** something known from instinctive feeling rather than conscious reasoning
- **Simultaneous:** occurring, operating, or done at the same time
- **Resurgence:** an increase or revival after a period of little activity, popularity, or occurrence.

Discuss

The end of the article provides an extensive list of famous accordion players and examples of accordion in famous songs. Select a handful of them (or have students pick) and find videos of their performances to watch in class. Select a variety of styles, including chromatic and diatonic accordions and a number of different styles. Ask students if they had heard any of the examples listed in the article prior to reading it. What surprised students the most about the accordion? Were they aware of how many styles of music featured the accordion prominently? Do they have a newfound appreciation for what they might have previously considered a niche instrument?

Q&A

1. What are the two broad categories of accordion?
2. Where does the name for the Stradella bass system come from?
3. What are the three parts of the modern accordion?
4. Who patented the first recognizable form of the accordion in 1829?
5. Which North American musical styles feature the accordion?

Answers

1. Diatonic and Chromatic
2. From the town of Stradella in the Lombardy region of Italy
3. The bellows, the keyboard, and the reeds
4. Cyrill Demian
5. Cajun, Zydeco, Tex-Mex, Conjunto

Expand

For a research project, have students select either a famous accordion player or genre of music that prominently features the accordion. Write about the history of their chosen player or genre, including how the accordion shaped their musicality. List several significant songs from the artist/genre's catalogue, detailing why these particular examples stand the test of time and how they exemplify the capabilities of the accordion (or how they expanded the sound of the instrument for future players). Projects can take the form of a written report, in-class presentation, or both.