



Composing Theme and Variations

A composition challenge for advanced students

After students understand theme and variations, more advanced students can compose their own. Using pre-determined elements in a Google slide deck, students make musical decisions to compose a variation on a simplified four-measure version of the theme from Benjamin Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*.

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Compose a variation on a given musical theme.
- Make musical choices to demonstrate the connection between music and emotions.

Standards

Missouri Learning Standards:

- MU:Cr1A.4-8 – Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
- MU:Cr2A.4-8 – Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Illinois Learning Standards:

- MU:Cr1A.4-8 – Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
- MU:Cr2A.4-8 – Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Materials

- [Google slide deck](#)
- Piano or any other chromatic instrument that the teacher is comfortable playing

Procedure

Open the Google slide deck. In the file menu, choose "Make a copy" of the "Entire presentation." This will allow you to manipulate the slides to complete the lesson.

- Play the theme on Slide #2 of the Google slide deck on an instrument of your choice. Ask students for emotion words that describe the theme, writing each word on a whiteboard or large piece of paper.
- Then play the theme again. Go back to the emotion words that were suggested and discuss which musical elements make the listener feel the emotion words they chose. Note students' ideas on the whiteboard.
- Explain that composers make lots of different choices when they write music to express the emotion or idea they want to share. The musical choices they make affect how we hear the music and what it makes us feel.
- Explain to students that sometimes very simple changes to the music can make us hear different emotions in it. Play the theme again with slight changes to its musical elements. For example, play it loudly with accented notes and then softly and smoothly. Or play it at a slow tempo and then at a fast tempo. Discuss with students how each musical change affects the emotion of the music.



Procedure (continued)

- Explain to students that you will work together to make musical choices to compose a variation on this theme. Follow the Google slide deck and the following outline of decisions that need to be made to compose together:
 - Decision 1: What emotion or emotions do we want to convey in our variation? Note students' ideas then come to a decision that will guide the class's compositional choices.
 - Decision 2 / **Slide #3**: Should our variation be in major or in minor? Play the theme in D minor and then in D major. Discuss how that musical change affects the emotion of the music. Decide which key to use, depending on which emotion was chosen in Decision 1. Then, go to **Slide #13** to COPY the key signature you chose, then PASTE it onto the grid on **Slide #12**.
 - If your class chose a minor key signature, proceed to **Slide #4 (minor)**. If your class chose a major key signature, proceed to **Slide #8 (major)**.
 - Decision 3 / **Slide #4 (minor)** or **#8 (major)**: Which variation of measure 1 should we use for our variation? Play the original measure 1 and its two variations for the students. Discuss which of the three versions of measure 1 best conveys the emotion decided on. Then, go to **Slide #13** to COPY the measure 1 you chose, then PASTE it onto the grid on **Slide #12**.
 - Repeat that process for measures 2, 3, and 4 (**Slides #5-7 in minor, Slides #9-11 in major**).
 - Final Decision: Should any dynamic markings be added to our variation? Would making the music loud, quiet, increase in volume, or decrease in volume contribute to the emotion of the music? If so, COPY dynamic markings from **Slide #13** and PASTE them below the grid on **Slide #12**.
- Play the variation that the class created on **Slide #12** and discuss if it conveys the emotion that the class chose at the outset. Why or why not? Is there anything that could be added or done differently to better express the emotion? Are there other musical elements that could be varied – such as instrumentation, tempo, articulation – that would help communicate the chosen emotion?



Assessment

Use the following rubric:

- Student contributed to the discussion about emotion in the theme. (1 point)
- Student collaborated with classmates to make musical decisions. (1 point)
- When discussing musical decisions for the class's composition, student's compositional suggestions were supported by ideas about emotional expression. (1 point)