Variations on a Shaker Melody

SLSO Learning Lab

ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

For Music Educators

Grades 4–8

Objectives

Students will:

- Recognize music as a means for preserving cultures
- Apply listening skills and knowledge of theme and variations to map out the variations of Aaron Copland's *Variations on a Shaker Melody*

Standards

Missouri Music Learning Standards

- MU: Cr1A.6-8a
- MU: Re7B.4-7a

Illinois Music Learning Standards

- MU: Cr1.1.5
- MU: Pr4.1.4-8b
- MU: Re7.1.4-8b

Materials

- Recording of the folk song *Simple Gifts*
- Recording of *Variations on a Shaker Melody* by Aaron Copland
- Listening map puzzle pieces or Google Slides

Vocabulary

- Theme and Variations

Listening Map Puzzle Pieces

The puzzle pieces appear in order of the piece, left to right in three rows. The first puzzle piece is the theme and the remaining five puzzle pieces (2-6) each represent a different variation.

Assessment

Theme and Variations (3-point rubric)

Student successfully:

- Demonstrates an understanding of variations by creating at least two variations of a supplied rhythm
- Completes the *Variations on a Shaker Melody* listening map
- Defends/explains their choices in the listening map using developmentally appropriate musical vocabulary

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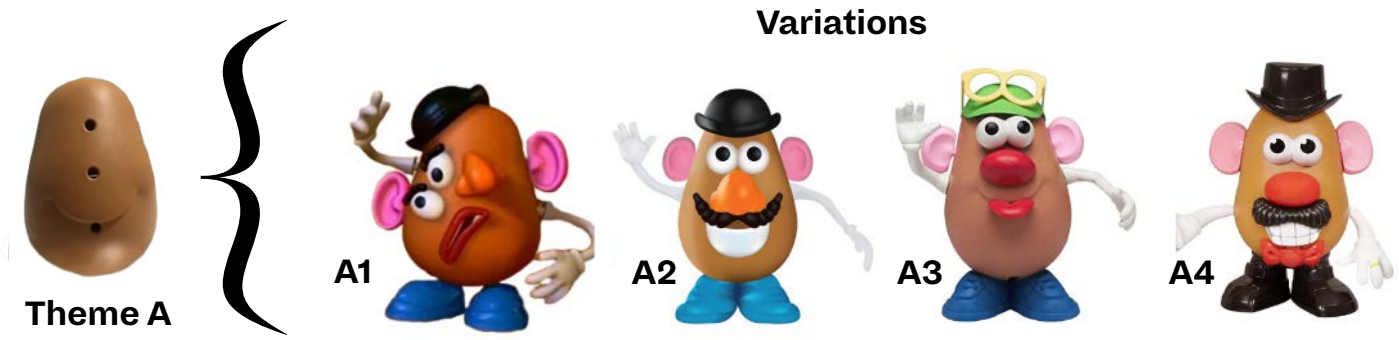
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Theme and Variations is a type of musical form.

In music, form refers to the structure of a piece of music. A piece of music is created by putting together different sections. When listening and analyzing a piece of music, the different sections are labeled using upper case letters, for example the "A section" or "B section." Each section contains different musical ideas, and often composers will repeat certain sections within the same composition.

Theme and Variations is a musical form where a composer takes a musical theme or statement (the A section) and then repeats it many different times. Each time the composer repeats the A section, they change or vary it slightly. These slightly changed re-statements of the original theme are the variations. Because each re-statement is only a variation of the original A section, these variations are labeled A1, A2 and so forth.

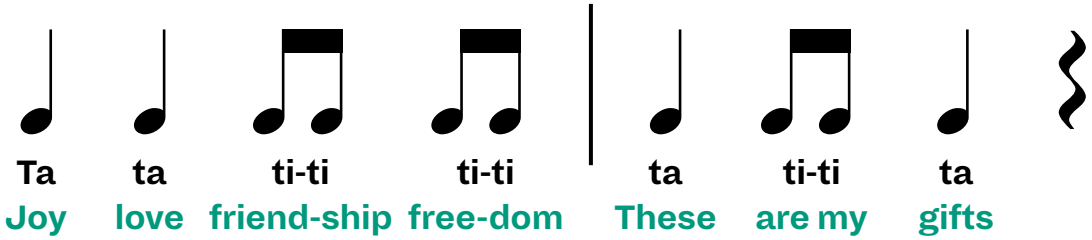
Theme and Variations is a lot like a Mr. Potato Head toy. The musical theme is the potato. No matter how we dress up the potato, it is still a potato. All the body parts and accessories added to the potato create different variations of the same potato.



What other examples of theme and variations can you find in your everyday life?

Create a Variation

Clap and say the following rhythmic phrase. This will be your theme.



Changing no more than two things from the original theme each time, how many variations of this rhythmic phrase can you create? Share your different ideas and try performing them together. If you get stuck, here are a few suggestions:

1. Vary the tempo (how slow or fast)
2. Vary the dynamics (how loud or soft)
3. Vary it by using body percussion other than clapping (stomp, pat, clap, snap)
4. Change the rhythm of one or two of the beats
5. Change the lyrics



Simple Gifts

Simple Gifts is an old Shaker melody. Listen to this recording by Yo-Yo Ma and Alison Krauss. Shakers are a religious group whose lifestyle emphasizes simplicity. A handful of Shakers emigrated from England to America in 1774 and within five years had grown to several thousand members. Today, there are very few Shakers, however their memory is carried on through their music like the tune *Simple Gifts*. American composer Aaron Copland took the melody from *Simple Gifts* and wrote *Variations on a Shaker Melody* in 1944, forever preserving this folk song and a piece of Shaker culture. The piece was originally part of a ballet titled *Appalachian Spring*. The ballet told the story of a newlywed couple living on a pioneer settlement in Pennsylvania during the 1800s.

Listen to a recording of Aaron Copland's *Variations on a Shaker Melody*. Do you recognize the *Simple Gifts* melody? Raise your hand each time you think you hear a new variation on this melody. How many variations did you hear? There are five variations on the theme, not counting that first statement of the theme.

Build a Listening Map

Print and cut out the following six rectangles or use the digital listening map in Google Slides. Each rectangle is a puzzle piece that corresponds to a section (the theme or one of the variations) of Copland's piece. Take some time to look for patterns and try to decipher the symbols on each puzzle piece. What do you think each piece represents musically?

Listen to *Variations on a Shaker Melody*. While you listen, put the puzzle pieces in order to match what you hear in the music. You might need to listen more than once. When you're done, discuss what you heard and why you chose to put the cards in the order you did.

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