

Sample unit: Beginning songwriting.

© Andrea La Rose, 2008.

Class: 11th grade general music

Materials: pencil, staff paper, voices; teacher can provide chordal accompaniment on instrument of choice.

Prior knowledge: steady beat; whole, half, quarter notes and rests; 4/4 time signature; do re mi in C, F, and G in treble clef. Note that initial anacrusis (pick-up note) has not been covered; in this lesson students use a whole measure and fill the empty beats with rests.

Goals: This serves as a summary of their prior knowledge. New concepts include

- understanding of strong and weak beats in 4/4 meter
- understanding of strong and weak syllables in English
- understanding of how not all music begins on beat one

Description: I used this unit at an ELL high-school as a final project to sum up everything we had learned in the semester. It can be adapted for younger students (5th grade and up). Each lesson can also be repeated as practice. The lessons can also be expanded and revisited as students gain more knowledge (larger pitch sets, other durations, other meters). When we performed them in class, I used simple harmonies (almost exclusively tonic and dominant) and accompanied them on ukulele. With a more advanced class, the students could also figure out where to use tonic and dominant chords.

Lessons are written out in a narrative form, using the way I usually present the material, the kinds of things I say, questions I ask, etc. These can be copied and passed out as worksheets, or simply done in a lecture/discussion format. Before each lesson is a one-page summary of what the lesson covers, also modeled off of the kinds of things I say when teaching.

I have chosen not to indicate timings for the lessons, something I normally do for myself. For the group I used this unit with, we spent at least two classes on each lesson (once per week), simply because they needed that kind of time. In other situations, one might only need one class per lesson or even be able to cover the material in one or two classes.

First lesson: setting your name to music.

Second lesson: putting a short sentence to music.

Third lesson: creating a 16-bar song.

Summary of Lesson 1: setting your name to music.

Pages 3-7 comprise a worksheet packet, explaining the concepts and the procedure to follow. You can hand out the packet and have them work on it solo, in pairs, or in small groups. Alternately, you can go over the worksheet as a class, or go over the concepts and procedure without the packet, then hand out the packet as a way to review.

Procedure summary:

Talk about strong beats and weak beats.

- In any beat pattern which is always the strongest beat? Why? In a group of four beats, what's the next strongest?

Talk about accented and unaccented syllables.

- What makes up a syllable? When we speak, is every syllable emphasized equally? How do we know which syllables are accented? What syllables have the most accent? (primary) Next most? (secondary)

When we set words to music, the strong syllables go on the strong beats and the weak syllables go on the weak beats. Figure out how to set your name in 2 to 4 measures of 4, rhythmically. Use the fewest possible measures. For example, if your name has two syllables, you won't need four measures. Use your name (the packet has my name) or some famous name, such as "George Washington," as examples.

Once you've assigned beat numbers to the syllables in your name, you can write it in staff form, using a one-line staff. Put the lyrics under the staff, and the appropriate note durations over the syllables.

Add a melody to your name, make sure it ends on do. Write it in all three keys: G = do, F = do, and C = do.

Take turns writing people's examples on the board so that class can perform them.

Putting words to music!

In a group of four beats, which beat is the strongest?

Why?

Which beat is the next strongest? (Hint: what's the most common way to divide a group of four things?)

In a group of four beats, beats 1 and 3 are _____. Beats 2 and 4 are _____.

What are syllables?

What part of a word helps you distinguish one syllable from another? (Hint: consonants or vowels?)

In the name "Benjamin Franklin," how many syllables are there in each word? Are they all emphasized the same way? Which syllables are stronger? Put a long mark $\bar{\text{~}}$ over the vowel of the strongest syllable in each word.

If a word has two syllables, one will be strong (put $\bar{\text{~}}$ over the vowel) and the other will be weak (put \sim over the vowel). If a word has more than two syllables, there will be a second-strongest syllable (put $\acute{\text{~}}$ over the vowel).

For example, in my name, Andrea, there are three syllables; the first syllable is the strongest, the last syllable is the second-strongest, and the middle syllable is weak: $\bar{a}ndr\acute{e}a$ (I wrote it with all lower case letters, because the capital letter hid the mark).

That's how I like to say my name. In many other languages, my name is pronounced not only with different vowel sounds, but also so that the second syllable is the strongest: $\check{a}ndr\acute{e}a$.

Write your name down (first and last!). Think about how you normally pronounce it. Mark the syllables as strongest, second-strongest (if applicable), and weakest.

When we put words to music, we put the strong syllables on the strong beats and the weak syllables on the weak beats. We need at least two measures to put our name to music. Some people will need three or four; we'll look at that in a moment.

You should have come up with the following for Benjamin Franklin:
 bēnjāmín frānkličn.

Since the first syllable in each word is the strongest, which beat should each first syllable go on?

“Benjamin” has three syllables and the last beat is the second strongest. The second strongest syllable should go on the second strongest beat; what beat is that?

Here are two ways that you can put the name “Benjamin Franklin” into music, using the rhythms that we know:

3

When I do this exercise, I write numbers over the syllables, so I know what beats they go on. I put 1s on the strong syllables first (long mark), then put 3s on the second strongest syllables (acute accent), finally filling in the weak beats, putting 4s on syllables before beat 1, and 2s before 3s.:

1 23 4 1
 āndrĕá lâ rōse

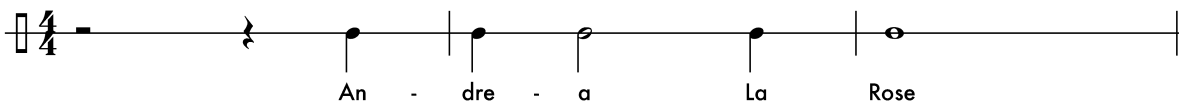
This is easy when your name starts with a strong syllable. What happens if your name doesn't start with a strong syllable? We can use the French pronunciation of my name as an example.

In French (and most European languages), my first name is pronounced: *ándrĕá*. So if I try my number trick:

1
ándrĕá.

The first beat goes with the second syllable, which is the strongest. So where do I put the first syllable in my name? What beat comes before beat 1?

In order to solve this, the first syllable of my name has to go on beat 4. Since nothing is happening before beat 4, then I have to fill the first three beats with silence: rests.



That's one way to set my name to music. We could vary the second measure a few different ways. Try them out; see which you like best.

Set your name rhythmically like we did in the examples above. Use the staff paper at the end of this packet.

Some things to notice:

- When you have a word with two or more syllables, put a hyphen (-) between each syllable, so we can see what syllables belong together. (See above examples.)
- You might find that you don't use all of the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4. For example, first I put 1s on the strong beats:

1 1
ándrĕá lă rōse

Then I put 3s on the second strongest:

3 1 1
ándrĕá lă rōse

Then 2s and 4s:

3 1 2 4 1
ándrĕá lă rōse

Technically, I should have a 4 between the 3 and the 1 in *ándrĕá*, and a 3 between the 2 and the 4 going from the final *ă* in *Andrea* and *La*. We can put those number in there, in parentheses, so

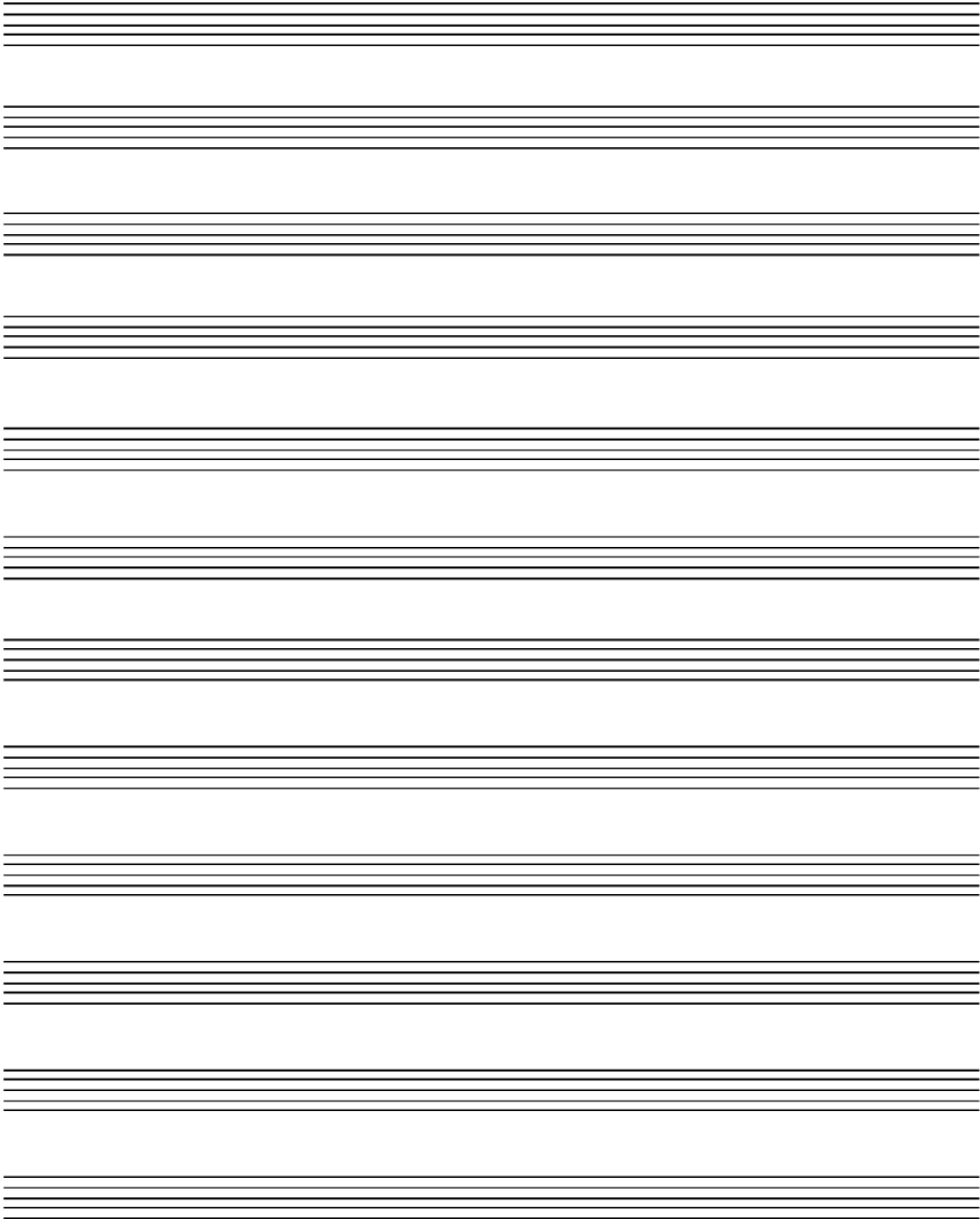
that we know to account for them, but we do not begin a syllable on them; the syllable will be held through that beat:

3(4)12(3)4 1

ándrĕă lă rōse

You'll notice in the example above that I didn't begin my name on beat 3, however, I started it on beat 4. I decided that it sounds weird to hold out the first syllable of my name for that long; it gets too much emphasis. So I changed it. You might have to make the same judgment calls when setting your name. Chant it out loud so you can hear and feel whether it fits; if it seems a little funny, change it.

When you've finished giving your name a rhythm, then you can add a melody: Using do re and mi in any key (C = do, F = do, or G = do – remind yourself what re and mi are in each key!), make up a melody to go with your name. In order for it to sound "normal," the last note should be do. Then we'll try singing each other's names.



Summary of Lesson 2: setting a sentence to music.

This expands on the first lesson in that now the students have more words and more measures to organize. Pages 9 and 10 can serve as a worksheet.

Procedure Summary:

Make up a 6-10 syllable sentence. It can be about anything, just not inappropriate, of course.

Say the sentence out loud several times, listening for the most emphasized syllables. Map out what syllables go with what beats, as in the previous lesson.

Take turns putting people's sentences on the board, correcting them if necessary and chanting them.

Then add melody.

Putting words to music! Part 2.

- Make up a sentence with 6-10 syllables. Don't spend a long time trying to come up with the best sentence ever. Just use what pops into your head (as long as it's appropriate).

Example:

I love my shiny, red bicycle. (9 syllables)

- Say the sentence out loud, naturally, like you mean it. Repeat it a few times. Find up to 4 strong syllables (you'll probably have less than 4). When I say this sentence like I mean it, the strong syllables are like this:

I lōve my shīny, red bīcycle.

- Put the number 1 over those syllables.

1 1 1
I lōve my shīny, red bīcycle.

Figure out where the other syllables go:

- Fit your sentence into 4 measures of 4 beats each.
- After you know where the 1s are, put 4s on the syllables right before them:

4 1 4 1 4 1
I lōve my shīny, red bīcycle.

- Then if there are syllables between 1 and 4, those should be assigned 2s if you feel they are very weak, or 3s if you think they are a little stronger. Keep saying the sentence out loud; that will help you decide. There's often more than one "right" way to do it.

4 1 4 1 2 4 1 2 3
I lōve my shīny, red bīcycle.

- Put the "unused" beats in parentheses; for example, if you have the word "doghouse" in one measure, you could have 1(2) over dog and 3(4) over house, or 1 over dog and 2(34) over house. The idea is to account for every beat.

(123)4 1(23)4 12(3)4 1 2 3(4)
I lōve my shīny, red bīcycle.

You should be able to see four groups of 1234. Those will be your measures when you notate it.

- Remind yourself of what the note values are and how long each one lasts.
- Notate your sentence on a one-line staff, putting the syllables underneath the notes. Make sure each measure has 4 beats. Chant your sentence several times, making changes as you see fit.
- If you have numbers in parentheses at the beginning of your sentence, like we do in the example, then those become rests. For the other parentheses, you have a choice whether to hold out the syllable or to use rests:

5

I love my shiny, red bicycle.

I love my shiny, red bicycle.

- Add a melody using do, re, and mi, using C = do, F = do, or G = do. Notate your song on a full staff.

Summary of Lesson 3:

This simply expands lesson 2 into a whole song. Students must write 4 sentences of 6-10 syllables that they will fit into four sets of four measures. To help them come up with four sentences, the students picked a random topic out of a hat (The list of words I used is on the final page). The lyrics could be serious or silly, rhyme or not.

I had the students work in pairs and placed some time constraints on them, so that the songs would get written quickly and we could go through them all.

Putting words to music! Part 3.

- You and your partner have 20 minutes to come up with a song about a randomly chosen topic. You will pick topics out of a hat.
- Make up 4 sentences with 6-10 syllables.
- Each sentence must be fit into four measures of 4 beats, using whole, half, and quarter notes and rests.
- The first and last sentences must end in do.
- We will put the finished songs on the board and sing them. You must be ready to copy your song on to the board at the end of 20 minutes!

Here's another strategy to help you figure out what lyrics go on which beats:

After you have your sentences and you've figured out where the strong syllables are, then draw your 16 measures in a set of 4 one-line staves (see below the example sentences).

Example sentences (read them out loud):
(topic = glasses)

Yēsterday, I brōke my glāsses.
Todāy, I cān't see ānything.
Tomōrrow, I'll get nēw ones.
Whāt a relief thāt will be!

Four blank musical staves, each divided into four measures by vertical bar lines. The staves are horizontal lines with vertical tick marks at the beginning, end, and between each of the four measures.

Write the words underneath each staff, putting the strong syllables by the beginning of each measure. Why? That's where beat 1 is. Each sentence has four measures; if it doesn't fill up the four measures, then those measures will be filled with rests. Here's the first sentence:

|_____| |_____| |_____| |_____|
Yēsterday, I brōke my glāsses.

The second sentence could look like this:

|_____| |_____| |_____| |_____|
Todāy, I cān't see ānything.

And that's perfectly fine, but we could also move it so that the "-day" part of "today" comes on the first beat of the first measure of the second staff. If we do that, then where does the "To-" part go?

|_____| |_____| |_____| |_____|
Yēsterday, I brōke my glāsses. To-
|_____| |_____| |_____| |_____|
-dāy, I cān't see ānything.

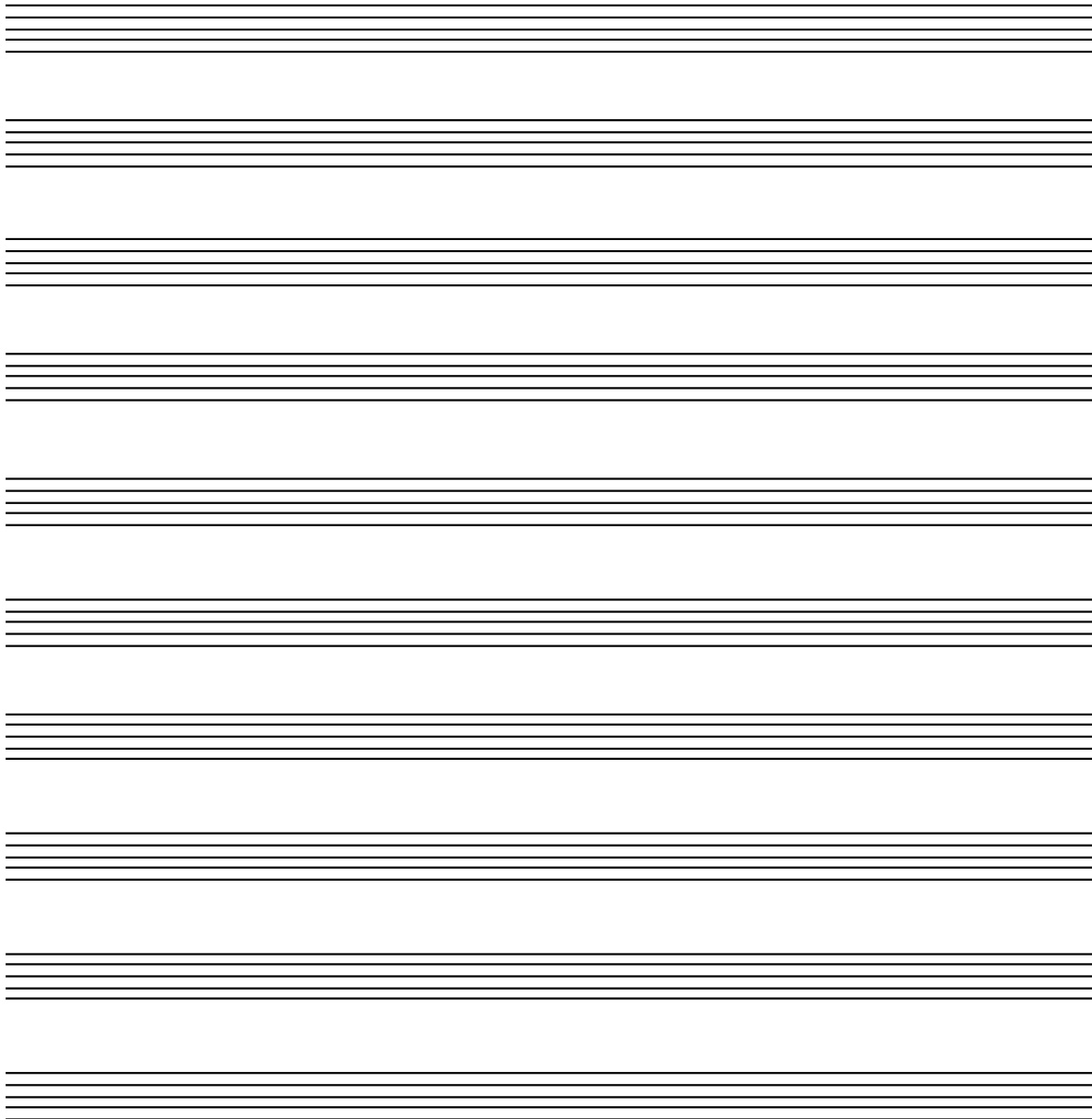
Notice how we've moved "To-" to the end of the first line. What beat will we sing "To-" on? Beat 4. Look for opportunities like this when you are writing your songs. Try to put the first strong syllable of each sentence on the first beat of each set of four measures.

Here's what the rest of our sample might look like:

|_____| |_____| |_____| |_____|
Yēsterday, I brōke my glāsses. To-
|_____| |_____| |_____| |_____|
-dāy, I cān't see ānything. To-
|_____| |_____| |_____| |_____|
-mōrrow, I'll get nēw ones.
|_____| |_____| |_____| |_____|
Whāt a relief thāt will be!

This gives you a general idea of what syllables will fall on beat 1 and where everything else has to fit. You'll still have to make decisions about how long certain words will be – for example, you could have both "new" and "ones" be whole notes and take up two measures.

Once you've figured out the rhythms, rewrite the song with a melody on a five-line staff, using do, re, and mi, in either G = do, F = do, or C = do. Remember that the last syllable in the first and last sentences must end with do.



The image contains ten blank five-line musical staves, arranged vertically. Each staff consists of five horizontal lines, providing a template for writing a melody using the solfège syllables do, re, and mi.

anger	boys	cars	dancing	evening
flowers	girls	happiness	indifference	justice
kitchen	love	money	noise	opportunity
party	questions	rain	summer	television
undercover	vacation	waste	yesterday	zoo
apples	boredom	cats	dreaming	eating
fear	garden	horses	islands	jumping
kids	laughing	marriage	never	ocean
peace	quiet	roots	sleep	trash
ugly	vines	winter	yellow	zebra
alone	books	candy	dogs	egg
flags	growing up	home	ice	job
karate	laziness	monkey	new	office
pigs	queen	river	snoring	talking
upset	vitamins	water	yarn	zero