



Aaron Copland (November 14, 1900-December 2, 1990)

Aaron Copland was one of America's most famous composers. Born in Brooklyn, New York, he went to France as a teenager to study music with the well-known teacher Nadia Boulanger. While he started out studying traditional forms of composition, his own style soon became very "American." Aaron Copland believed that simple tunes could be beautiful.

Additional biographical information on Aaron Copland has been provided on the CD ROM.



Kentucky Learning Goals and Academic Expectations

1.14 Students make sense of ideas and communicate ideas with music.

2.22 Students create works of art and make presentations to convey a point of view.

2.23 Students analyze their own and others' artistic products and performances using accepted standards.

2.24 Students have knowledge of major works of art, music, and literature and appreciate creativity and the contributions of the arts and humanities.

4.2 Students use productive team membership skills.

5.2 Students use creative thinking skills to develop or invent novel, constructive ideas or products.

The Story of John Henry

The legend of *John Henry* tells the story of a "steel-driving man," a strong African American man who worked building the railroads in the late 1800s. Steel-driving men like John Henry used large hammers and stakes to pound holes into the rock, which were then filled with explosives that would blast a cavity deeper and deeper into the mountain. Eager to reduce costs and speed up progress, some tunnel engineers were using steam drills to power their way into the rock. It is said that the "Captain" of the job heard of the steam drills and said that he would buy one of these machines if it could beat his best steel driver. According to legend, a contest

was held, and John Henry beat the steam drill by three inches. But he died with his hammer in his hand. He won, but died of exhaustion, his life cut short by his own superhuman effort.

No one knows for sure if John Henry existed. That is one of the things that makes the legend so intriguing. According to the legend he grew to stand 6 feet tall, 200 pounds - a giant in that day. John Henry has a special connection to West Virginia. It is said there was a 200-pound, African American man who helped build the tunnel near Talcott, West Virginia (Summers County). He was reported to also be a gifted

banjo player and may have been a freed slave from the South. You can find an historical plaque and a large statue of John Henry near Talcott.

The Music of John Henry

In 1940, Aaron Copland made the legend of *John Henry* the subject of a piece of music.

Copland's *John Henry* is based upon the folk song of the same name. Aaron Copland wrote *John Henry* as a short ballad for small orchestra. The orchestral piece featured the folk song, *John Henry*.

He revised it 12 years later for a larger orchestra. *John Henry* was originally called a "railroad ballad" or a "descriptive fantasy."

The piece is in a theme and variation form. The folk tune *John*

Henry was very limited in pitches and contained syncopations and driving rhythms.

Copland's *John Henry* states the tune six times. Melodic variation is common in actual folk-song performance. Copland shapes these six statements into a fantasy depicting the story. Moreover, his score relies heavily on percussion instruments, including an anvil, sandpaper blocks and train whistle, in addition to instruments such as timpani, bells, triangle, bass drum, cymbals and tam tam drums.

Important Note: We were unable to secure the license to provide an entire listening sample for this piece. On both the provided CD ROM and the audio CD (track 23) you will be hearing an abbreviated version only.



Copland Activities - Learning a Folk Ballad

1. Discuss with the students tall tales and legends. Tell students that a tall tale is a story that is exaggerated and that a legend is a story that is believed to be true but has never been proven. Legends also contain elements of exaggeration that may make them seem unbelievable. Ask the students if they have ever heard of any tall tales or legends.

2. Read the story of *John Henry* to the students. After reading the story, ask the students what types of sounds might match the story. Have students experiment with

making various sounds to a steady beat.

3. Tell the students that the story of *John Henry* has been turned into a folk song. Folk songs are sung easily without accompaniment, express feelings and emotions, tell stories of love and adventure, can be altered or “touched up” by the imagination of each singer, and exist in many variations. Folk songs are also passed down from generation to generation by teaching the song to others through an oral tradition.

4. Teach the students the *John Henry* ballad. An easy way to begin is for the classroom teacher to sing each verse with the students chiming in on the last line. A handout of the music *John Henry* has been included on the next page.

5. Ask the students to teach the song to their family. Let them know that through this effort they are keeping the tradition of folk music alive.

Copland Activities - Compose a Sound Piece

1. After hearing the story of *John Henry* and singing or listening to the ballad of *John Henry*, discuss the characters and events in the story. Have the students come up with sounds (instruments, body percussion, or sounds created with objects in the environment) that could represent these characters and events. The students then create a sound piece that would tell the story of *John Henry* using sound only.

2. Tell the students that in *John Henry*, Aaron Copland used the instruments of the orchestra to tell the story. Just prior to attending the concert, remind the students to listen for which instruments Copland used to help him tell the story.

Note: Please remember that we have provided an abbreviated listening sample version of the piece on the CD ROM, and as Track 23 on the audio CD.

Copland Activities - Theme and Variations

1. Tell the story of *John Henry* to the students. Tell them that the story was later turned into a folk song. Discuss how folk songs and folk legends are passed from generation to generation by singing or telling the story. Maybe their parents told them a story that they learned from their parents, and someday they will tell it to their children. Everyone tells stories a little differently, so there might be some differences in the details, but the main story line stays the same. The story gets changed or “varied” over the years.

2. Tell the students that Aaron Copland used the folk song, *John Henry*, as the main idea for his piece of music. He also changed, or varied, the story by changing the instruments, the tempo, and the dynamics. When a composer takes a melody and then changes it several times, it is called “Theme and Variations.”

3. Teach the students the *John Henry* folk ballad (music and lyrics are included on the next page). Tell them that this is the melody that Aaron Copland uses as his main idea.

4. After singing the song, ask the students to draw a picture of what they think John Henry might have looked like. When they have completed their drawings, display them in the room and have the students share them with the class. Feel free to also send artwork to the WVSO to display. Point out that everyone’s drawings may be a little bit different, but the main idea may still be seen. The class has created their own type of theme and variations. Instead of drawing their own picture, you may wish to use the enclosed drawing of John Henry on page 7.

West Virginia Content Standards and Objectives

Music

Standard 1: Performing (MU.S.1)

Students will: sing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music; and perform on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.

Standard 2: Exploring (MU.S.2)

Students will: read and notate music;

listen to, analyze, and describe music;

and evaluate music and music

performances.

Standard 3: Creating (MU.S.3)

Students will: improvise melodies, variations, and accompaniments; and compose and arrange music within specified guidelines.

Standard 4: Relating (MU.S.4)

Students will: understand relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts; and understand music in relation to history and culture.

Ohio Academic Content Standard Benchmarks

Music

Historical, Cultural and Social Contexts

By the end of the K-4 program:

A. Identify and demonstrate basic music forms. B. Identify and respond to music of historical and cultural origins.

Creative Expression and Communication

By the end of the K-4 program:

B. Read, write, improvise and compose melodies and accompaniments.

Analyzing and Responding

By the end of the K-4 program:

A. Identify and demonstrate elements of music using developmentally appropriate music vocabulary. B. Identify the sounds of a variety of instruments including orchestra, band and classroom instruments.

Valuing Music/Aesthetic Reflection

By the end of the K-4 program:

C. Demonstrate how music communicates meaning of text, feelings, moods or images, and influences personal preferences.

Connection, Relationships and Applications

By the end of the K-4 program:

Copland - John Henry Ballad

John Henry

North American Folk Song

When John Hen-ry was a lit-tle ba-by Sit-tin' on his ma-ma's knee,--

8 he__ gave a long and a lone- some cry. "This__ ham-mer'll be the

14 death of__ me, Lord, Lord. This__ ham-mer'll be the death of__ me.

2. Well, the captain said to John Henry,
 "Gonna bring that steam drill 'round,
 Gonna tke that steam drill out on the job.
 Gonna whop that steel on down, Lord, Lord,
 Gonna whop that steel on down."
3. John Henry said to the captain,
 "Well, a man ain't nothin' but a man,
 But before I let that steam drill beat me down,
 Gonna die with my hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord,
 Gonna die with my hammer in my hand."
4. Well, the man that invented the steam drill,
 He thought he was mighty fine.
 But John Henry drove his fifteen feet,
 And the steam drill only made nine, Lord, Lord,
 The steam drill only made nine.
5. John Henry looked up at the mountain,
 And his hammer was strikin' fire.
 He hammered so hard that he broke his heart,
 And he laid down his hammer and he died, Lord, Lord,
 He laid down his hammer and he died.
6. They took John Henry to the tunnel,
 And they buried him in the sand,
 And every locomotive comes a-raorin' by,
 Says, "There lies a steel-drivin' man, Lord, Lord,
 There lies a steel-drivin' man.

Please note that there are many versions of the lyrics for this ballad. We have chosen lyrics from the following source: <http://www.mcsk12.net/admin/tlapages/curriculumguides/visual-theatre/PowerofArtisticExpress.pdf>

Copland - John Henry Coloring Sheet

Complete the picture of John Henry. Be sure to give him a face, hair and shoes. You may color his clothes and his hammer any color you wish!

