

A COMPOSITION LESSON WITH BEETHOVEN

Dr. Charles Rochester Young

Composing music is an extremely complex process where numerous decisions are made. The following four-day lesson is one example of how compositional decision-making can be introduced using both the product (finished score) and the process as a guide. The objective is to teach students how to think and make decisions like a great composer through the use of music notation software.

Using Beethoven as a model

Beethoven wrote many sets of variations. We know through Beethoven's sketchbooks that he often used a theme or chord progression as the basis for these sets of variations. Once he had written numerous variations, Beethoven placed the best ones into a suitable order, thus creating a final set of variations.

To begin recreating this process, the students are given a music notation file for the theme from Beethoven's *32 Variations on an Original Theme in C Minor* (for piano). At this point, the students have received only the theme, NOT the entire published piece.

Day One

The students first listen and study the theme. Students are instructed to adjust the theme on the computer to produce their own variations. (NOTE: Since the theme is very simple, students can easily do this without needing much keyboard experience). Each student then saves each separate variation they make. Once they have made a small number of variations, the teacher takes all of the saved files and posts them on a local access network, where the students can see and hear them.

Day Two

In the next class, students discuss and compare their classmates' variations. Students then take these assorted variations and turn them into an ordered set of variations. Once these sets of variations are finished, the teacher places the students' work on a network, where the students can see and hear them.

Day Three

In the next class, the students discuss and compare their respective sets of variations with the sets created by their classmates. Since all of their sets use a different order of variations, students are encouraged to explain the various decisions they made.

Day Four

Finally, the students are given the entire published piece and a recording so they can compare their decisions with those of Beethoven. These resources allow students to compare their thinking with Beethoven's thinking at a similar stage in the process. Remarkably, the students often organize certain aspects of their variations similar to Beethoven! I'm convinced that this thinking results from following Beethoven's process, rather than relying solely on analysis of the product (finished score). In other words, by asking the same questions as Beethoven, they often arrive at the same decisions.

Conclusion

Music notation software is an ideal solution for compositional activities like these, being much easier and faster than cutting and pasting the music with scissors and tape. Furthermore, since students are playing their examples through a MIDI keyboard, they can evaluate their work immediately without having to copy the music, find musicians, and wait for them to rehearse and perform it.

Dr. Charles Rochester Young is Chair of Composition and Music Theory and Director of the Computer Music Center at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Dr. Young is also an award-winning composer and in 1999 was named Wisconsin Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation and the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education.