

WITH

ALLEN TOUSSAINT

MELODY

Photograph by Carol Rosegg

**About the Program**

Behind the Scenes with Allen Toussaint looks at melody as a basic element of music. Working with children at the piano, and starting from their ideas, Allen Toussaint helps children discover that melodies (or tunes) can have different characters and that they are building blocks of musical form. Children explore musical *contour*, or shape, in their melodies and learn how *repetition*, *variation*, and *contrast* can add interest and excitement to a musical composition.

About the Artist

Allen Toussaint, a native of New Orleans, is a jazz pianist and a prolific jazz composer. He has produced, written for, and performed with Elvis Costello, Patti LaBelle, the Pointer Sisters, Otis Redding, Paul Simon, and Ringo Starr, among others. His song "Southern Nights," recorded by Glen Campbell, was recognized by BMI as the most performed song of the year in 1977 and was nominated for a Grammy award. His musical "The High Rollers' Social and Pleasure Club" opened on Broadway in April 1992.

Jumping Off Activity**Warming Up Our Ears: Exploring Melody**
(15 minutes)

This activity prepares students to think about melody.

When we whistle a song, we are whistling a melody, or tune. Melodies have shape, or contour, because they are made up of different individual notes that can go up or down. Usually in a melody, some notes are longer, some shorter.

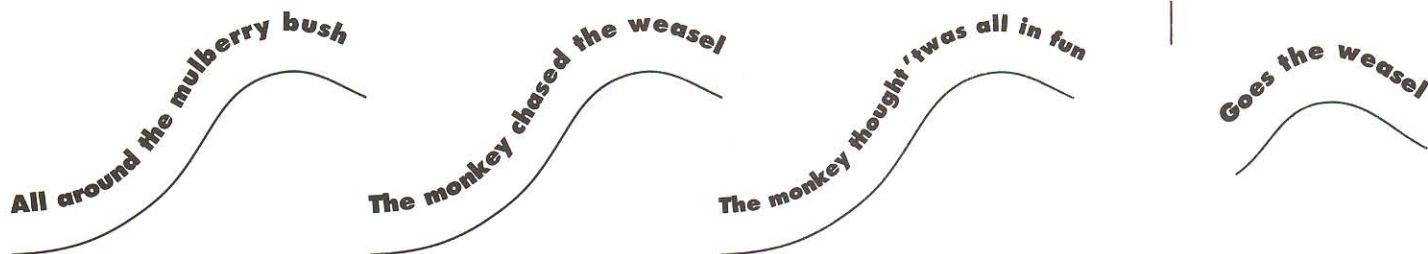
Write a sentence of at least ten words on the blackboard—any sentence will do. (For example, "Michael turned his head, trying to locate the source of the sound," or "Sally climbed the steps very slowly, stopping when she reached the top.") Have one student read it as ordinary speech. Now create your own melodic treatments of this sentence.

Ask each student to read the sentence, saying some words in a high voice, some in a low voice, or moving from high to low. Ask students to read some words very close together or to stretch others out. Suggest that they add pauses or hold some words a long time. (Not every possibility needs to be included in every reading.) Encourage your students to think creatively and come up with their own interpretations of the sentence.

Can the students impose a mood or feeling onto the sentence? Have them read the sentence with different feelings, such as with anger or with excitement, and then discuss how they achieved that feeling in musical terms. Did they speed up the reading, make it jerky or smooth, or jump between very different high and low sounds? Composers can use melody to communicate a mood or feeling. How do the melodic treatments affect their understanding of the sentence? Were the words clear? Were the students sometimes more interested in the sounds than in the meaning of the words?

Viewing

Before continuing the activities, observe how some composers use melodies in their musical compositions by viewing *Behind the Scenes with Allen Toussaint*.



Follow-up Activities

1. Exploring Melodic Contours and Their Characters (45 minutes)

This activity helps students discover how melodic contours—or shapes—can communicate different feelings.

Ask each student to come to class having thought of a melody from a song they like. Any type of song will do—a folk song, a rock tune, a theme from a symphony. If you or the students prefer, songs can be brought in on audio cassette. Sing or listen to some of the songs. Ask your students to pay attention to the shape of each melody. Melodies can have many shapes: some are smooth and arching, others more jagged and compressed.

Think of “Pop Goes the Weasel.” If you were to “draw” the melodic contour of this song, it would look something like the diagram above.

Have three or four students come up to the board one by one and sketch the overall shape (not the individual notes) of a melody as the class sings or listens to it. (You may have to play or sing the melody more than once.) Compare the shapes of the different melodies, noting their distinguishing features. Some melodies, for example, may move slowly from low to high, while others may move quickly. Some may have many jumps and bounces. Do specific moods seem to be communicated by different melodic shapes?

Now divide your class into groups of three or four. Ask each group to think of a scenario—for example, an encounter between a boy and a girl, a folk tale, or an episode that happened at home. Give them three minutes to discuss what happens in this scene. Now tell them to act out their scenarios using only their voices, not their bod-

ies, and to use only one syllable as text throughout their entire scenario: the word “AH.” They should use this word with as many inflections and meanings as they can, trying for at least thirty different “AH”s.

This is an excellent way for your students to explore melodic contour and discover how each contour can suggest a different meaning. Give your students about fifteen minutes to work on and rehearse their scenarios; then have the groups perform them for the class. Later, discuss the varieties of melodic “AH” shapes. Which were particularly effective, which unusual, which funny or sad? Why? Were the students’ intentions as “composers” clear? If so, how did they achieve this clarity?

2. Creating Melodies (30 minutes)

This activity lets students explore how to build melodies and how to compose short pieces that have form.

Melodies can be developed by using *repetition*, *variation*, and *contrast*. Usually there will be a combination of the three to create an interesting and beautiful melody. Pick a melody your students are sure to know, such as “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.” Sing the melody through with your class. Ask students to think of all the ways this melody can be changed, and list them on the blackboard. For example, they could sing the melody faster or slower or at a higher or lower pitch. Some of the words could be shorter, others longer. They could add silences or impose different moods on the melody, such as happiness or sadness, fear or excitement.

Now arrange your own version of the song you chose. Sing the original melody and then

two or three variations. Conclude by “coming home” and singing the original melody.

Next, divide your class into groups of three or four. Ask each group to create their own melody and variation composition. They can continue to work on the first song, select another familiar melody, or invent their own tune. After singing the song in their groups, give them about ten minutes to create two contrasting variations. Point out that they are creating musical compositions with a particular form: idea (melody), variation, variation.

Encourage your students to experiment. Have the groups take turns performing their pieces for the class. You may wish to record and play back these performances. Which pieces worked well? Why?

Related Curriculum Activities

Language Arts

Songs and Stories—Speech has a shape not unlike that of song, and people speak in ways that emphasize the feelings they wish to convey. Read a short story, folk tale, or scene from a play to the class. Discuss how each character in the story or play might speak. Or have your students improvise a scene of dialogue from a book you are reading in class. Try to concentrate on how things are said as much as what is being said.

Social Studies

Songs and Cultures—Listen to folk songs from different cultures, paying particular attention to the melodies. Do the melodies tell us what the songs are about even when we cannot understand the words? What moods do the melodies convey? What do the melodies tell us about the culture from which they came?