Learning Guide

Composers

We hope you enjoyed learning about how music is made—from Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven to modern composers like Bill Sherman—and seeing how anyone can turn a small idea into a powerful song. Extend your learning with this print-ready Learning Guide!

What's in this Learning Guide?

Get Set to Listen
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.2-8.2

Vocabulary

Discussion Questions
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3-8.1; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3-8.3

Writing Prompts and Extension Projects
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3-8.1; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3-8.2; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3-8.3; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3-8.4; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3-8.7; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3-8.8

Musical Timeline

The Rhythm of Math
CCSS.Math.Content.3-4.NF.A.1

Mood Music: The Sound of Feelings
MU: 7 Perceive and analyze artistic work; CASEL: Self-Awareness

Make Your Voice Heard: Getting Started Composing
MU: 1 *Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work*; *CASEL: Self-Awareness*

Additional Resources and Book & Film List

The Children's Hour
kids public radio

© 2025 The Children's Hour radio show podcast
https://www.childrenshour.org/composers/

Get Set to Listen

1. Before listening!

Write down your response to one of these questions. Share with a partner or small group when you are finished.

- What does a composer do?
- What skills or talents do you think a composer needs?

2. After listening!

Write down your response to the following question. Share with a partner or small group when you are finished. How did your thoughts about the role of music and composers change after listening to this episode?

How have composers inspired people to be better, kinder, and more creative over the eras?

© 2025 The Children's Hour

Vocabulary

composer	A person who creates music. They write melodies, harmonies, rhythms, and sometimes lyrics, arranging sounds into a piece of music that can be performed by singers or musicians.
music producer	A person who oversees and manages the creation of a song or album. They help arrange, record, and mix music, making the music sound great.
Baroque era	**(4th+)** (1600–1750) A period in Western music when composers wrote ornate, dramatic, and expressive music. It included the rise of opera, complex harmonies, and instrumental music like the violin and harpsichord. **(k-3)** A time when music was fancy and dramatic, with lots of instruments and new styles like opera.
classical era	**(4th+)** (1750–1820) A period in Western music focused on clarity, balance, and form. Composers wrote symphonies, string quartets, and sonatas with simple, elegant melodies. **(k-3)** A time when music was clear, balanced, and elegant, with lots of symphonies and small group pieces.
romantic era	**(4th+)** (1820–1900) A period in Western music when composers focused on emotion, expression, and storytelling. Music often became dramatic, personal, and full of feeling, using rich harmonies and varied dynamics. **(k-3)** A time when music told stories and showed strong feelings, with lots of dramatic sounds.
cantata	A piece of music that people sing with instruments, often telling a story or sharing a message.

© 2025 The Children's Hour

Discussion Questions

1. How do composers use instruments and voices to express emotions?
2. How has technology changed the work of modern composers?
3. Why do you think some composers' music remains popular for hundreds of years?
4. Can you name a composer whose music you enjoy? What do you like about it?
5. How might a composer's life experiences influence their music?
6. How might learning about a composer's life change the way you make or listen to music?
7. If you could meet a composer from history, who would it be and what would you ask them?
8. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart had a sister named Maria Ana who was equally talented, but forced to stop her music career due to her gender. Do you think other composers have been left out of textbooks or fame because of their gender, culture, background, or social class? Why might that be?
9. Why is it important to listen to and learn from music from many different cultures and communities? (Listen to **Part 1: Music from many different cultures and communities with composer Bill Sherman**.)
10. Music connects people across ages, cultures, and backgrounds. How do you think it brings us together?

Group Discussion Strategies

Think Pair Share:
1. Individually, student writes down their answer to a question.
2. Students pair up and tell each other their answers.
3. Teacher calls for volunteers to share with the whole class their answer (and/or their partner's answer). Teacher notes key words/phrases on board.

Round Robin:
1. Teacher poses one question (written on top of a large page) to students, who are assembled into small groups of 3 or 4.
2. Students take turns brainstorming the answers. The recorder of the group writes down all answers.
3. The leader reads the group's ideas to the entire class. Teacher moderates.

© 2025 The Children's Hour

Writing Prompts

Narrative Prompts

1. Imagine you are a composer in the Romantic era. Write a diary entry about creating your first symphony. What inspires you? What challenges do you face?
2. Pretend you are a modern composer collaborating with musicians from around the world. Describe your day and the music you create together.
3. Choose a song you like and imagine the music comes to life as a character. Write a short story about how it interacts with the world.

Extensions:

- Create a mini soundtrack to accompany your story using instruments, digital apps, or body percussion.
- Rewrite your story from the composer's perspective or from the audience's point of view.

Informative/Explanatory Prompts

1. Explain how a composer creates a piece of music from an idea to performance. Include the steps and tools they might use.
2. Write an informative piece about a composer you admire. Include when and where they lived, the type of music they composed, and why their music is important.
3. Describe the different eras of music and how composers' styles changed over time.
4. Explain how music can reflect culture, history, or social issues. Give examples of composers whose work shows this.
5. Compare how composers from different countries or cultures create music. How does diversity in music make it richer?

Extensions:

- Create a timeline poster showing your chosen composer's life, key works, and historical context.
- Compare two composers from different cultures or eras in a Venn diagram or chart.

Opinion/Persuasive Prompts

1. Who is the most influential composer of all time? Explain your choice and give examples from their music.
2. Do you think composing music is more about emotion or technique? Support your opinion with examples.
3. Utilize the *Musical Timeline* and additional resources to research lesser-known composers, particularly women and composers from non-European backgrounds. Write about their life and argue why their music should be included in music history lessons.
4. If you could create a new piece of music to inspire change in the world, what would it be like?
5. Write a persuasive letter to your school music teacher advocating for underrepresented composers in the curriculum.

Extensions:

- Create a short presentation or video to share your opinion with your community.
- Curate a mini playlist of works by diverse composers and explain why you chose each piece.

© 2025 The Children's Hour

Musical Timeline

Listen

[Part 2: Classical Composers, A Timeline]



Medieval Era (500–1400)

Music was mostly religious and sung in churches (Gregorian chant).

Notable composers:
Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179, Germany, female)
Kassia (c. 810–c. 865, Byzantine Empire, female)
Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300–1377, France)



Renaissance Era (1400–1600)

Music became more expressive, with harmony and polyphony.

Notable composers:
Maddalena Casulana (c. 1544–c. 1590, Italy, female)
Juan del Encina (1468–1529, Spain)
Josquin des Prez (1450–1521, France/Low Countries)



Baroque Era (1600–1750)

Music became ornate and emotional; opera and instrumental music flourished.

Notable composers:
Barbara Strozzi (1619–1677, Italy, female)
Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741, Italy)
Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750, Germany)
George Frideric Handel (1685–1759, Germany/England)



Classical Era (1750–1820)

Music emphasized clarity, balance, and form; symphonies and string quartets flourished.

Notable composers:
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791, Austria)
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827, Germany)
Maria Anna “Nannerl” Mozart (1751–1829, Austria, female)
Franz Joseph Haydn (1732–1809, Austria)



Romantic Era (1820–1900)

Music became highly expressive and emotional; composers explored personal storytelling.

Notable composers:
Fanny Mendelssohn (1805–1847, Germany, female)
Clara Schumann (1819–1896, Germany, female)
Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849, Poland/France)
Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893, Russia)
Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904, Czech Republic)

© 2025 The Children’s Hour

Musical Timeline



20th Century & Modern Era (1900–Present)

Composers experimented with new sounds, technology, and global influences.

Notable composers:

Florence Price (1887–1953, USA, African American, female)
Aaron Copland (1900–1990, USA)
John Cage (1912–1992, USA)
Tan Dun (b. 1957, China)
Pauline Oliveros (1932–2016, USA, female)
Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990, USA)



Contemporary / 21st Century

Music blends classical, digital, and global styles; more voices are recognized.

Notable composers:

Jennifer Higdon (b. 1962, USA, female)
Valerie Coleman (b. 1970, USA, African American, female)
Hildur Guðnadóttir (b. 1982, Iceland, female)
Nobuko Imai (b. 1943, Japan, female)
Unsuk Chin (b. 1961, South Korea, female)

Sources and References

1. Taruskin, Richard. The Oxford History of Western Music. Oxford University Press. 2. Burkholder, J. Peter, Donald Grout, and Claude Palisca. A History of Western Music. W.W. Norton & Company. 3. Grove Music Online (Oxford Music Online) – Entries on musical eras, composers, and women composers. 4. Britannica.com – "Western Music" and individual composer pages. 5. Classics for Kids – Educational summaries of composers and music history. 6. BBC Teach – History of Music series for schools. 7. WomenComposers.com and International Alliance for Women in Music – Resources on female composers.

© 2025 The Children's Hour

The Rhythm of Math

Explore how math is used in music by understanding how note values, time signatures, and rhythms relate to fractions and patterns.

Materials

- Rhythm cards (whole, half, quarter, eighth notes, and rests)
- Percussion instruments or body percussion (claps, taps, snaps)

Demonstrate

What do music and math have in common?

- Music uses numbers and patterns — for example, each measure adds up to a total number of beats.
  - Whole note = 4 beats
  - Half note = 2 beats
  - Quarter note = 1 beat
  - Eighth note = ½ beat
- These values work just like fractions in math — they fit together to make a whole measure.

Guided Practice

1. Demonstrate 4/4 time: every measure equals 4 beats.
2. Write a few rhythm patterns on the board and have students clap or play them:
   - Example: ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ (4 quarters = 4 beats)
   - Example: ♩ ♩ 𝅗𝅥(2 quarters + 1 half = 4 beats)
3. Identify what “fractions” of the whole measure each note represents.

Activity

1. Give small groups rhythm cards and ask them to create a 4-beat rhythm that adds up correctly.
2. Groups perform their rhythms for the class using clapping, drums, or rhythm sticks.

Extension: switch to 3/4 time and try again!

Discuss

How is rhythm like math?

1. Review:
   - Whole = 4 beats
   - Half = 2 beats
   - Quarter = 1 beat
   - Eighth = ½ beat

Extensions

- Connect rhythms to adding and subtracting fractions.
- Compose short melodies that fit into 4-beat measures.
- Explore how different world music traditions use rhythm and pattern differently (e.g., African polyrhythms, Indian tala cycles).
- Talk about how computers and digital music software use math to keep rhythm and timing precise.

© 2025 The Children’s Hour

Mood Music: The Sound of Feelings

Listen

- **Part 3: Mood Music: The Sound of Feelings**

Music can change how you feel and what you want to do—whether it's sleeping, cleaning, or studying. Try a few songs and see how they affect you!

Listen

Play short clips of the following songs:

- **"Oya (Aw-Yah)" by Babatunde Olatunji**

An example of traditional West African Yoruba Talking Drums music.

- **"Flight of the Bumblebee" by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov**

A fast-paced orchestral piece that mimics the frantic, buzzing flight of a bumblebee.

- **"Moonlight Sonata" by Ludwig van Beethoven**

A deeply expressive piano piece, known for its hauntingly calm first movement that evokes a quiet, reflective night.

- **"Best Year Yet" by the James Jackson Jazz Trio**

A jazz piece perfect for cozying up with a good book.

- **"Attitude" by IVE**

This upbeat track is great for setting a positive tone while tackling cleaning or preparing for a big event.

After each song, ask:

- H*ow does this music make you feel? (happy, calm, excited, sad…)*
- *What would you want to do while listening? (sleep, dance, clean, do homework…)*

Respond

Describe your feelings with words or quick drawings.

Extensions

- Make a playlist for different activities.
- Compose a short rhythm or melody for a specific mood or activity.
- Connect to science by discussing how music affects the brain and body (heartbeat, focus, relaxation).
- Write a short paragraph about your favorite song and how it makes you feel.
- Listen to music from different cultures. What can we learn about other cultures by listening to their music?

© 2025 The Children's Hour

Make Your Voice Heard

Getting Started Composing

In The Children's Hour's "Composers" episode, we heard about how Beethoven proved that your creativity, voice, and inner strength can shine through—even if you can't hear it yourself. Modern composer Bill Sherman also emphasized the importance of expressing your own voice and offered tips for writing memorable, meaningful music. Every great song starts with a small idea—so why not give it a try?

Listen

- Part 4: Make Your Voice Heard – Music Writing Process

"When you're trying to teach something, if you're teaching it with a sound that people know and love, it's easier to grasp the learning part of it when the sound is also something you know." --Bill Sherman

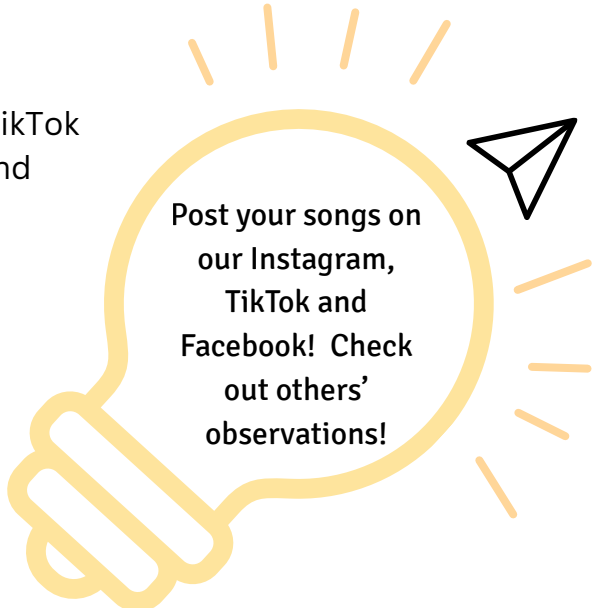
Questions for Getting Started

- *Where should I start — with a tune, rhythm, or mood?*
- *What do I want my music to sound or feel like?*
- *What instruments or sounds will I use?*
- *How can I show emotions like happiness, sadness, or excitement through music?*
- *Should my music tell a story or just create a feeling?*
- *How long should my piece be?*
- *What inspires me — nature, people, art, or something else?*
- *How can I make my music sound unique or different?*
- *What do I do if I get stuck or can't think of what to write next?*
- *How will I know when my music is finished?*

Upload your song to our Instagram @tchradio, TikTok @thechildrenshourradio, and Facebook page, and check out what others have observed!

Mail your song to:
The Children's Hour
PO Box 70236
Albuquerque, NM 87197

Record a Voice Message
This might be used on The Children's Hour!



© 2025 The Children's Hour

Additional Resources

History of Western Music: Overview & Timeline
This brief overview includes summaries of the major eras, a timeline, a video, and a quiz.

Music by Women: Composers
A collection of brief biographies of women composers with additional resources.

Top 100 Composers
This list of composers includes basic information, links to Wikipedia articles, and audio recordings of some of their famous works.

Top 19 Famous Women Composers
This article summarizes their contributions, including a "why unique" section for each woman.

Composers Outside of Europe, The Global North, and the Western World (1500-1850)
A good list, with references and additional resources.

From Griots to Mbalax: Traditional West African Music
A good article with video examples.

Piece by Piece
An empowering LEGO-animated documentary that follows Pharrell Williams's rise from his youth in Virginia Beach to global musical icon.

Music

"Oya (Aw-Yah)" by Babatunde Olatunji
An example of traditional West African Yoruba Talking Drums music.

"Flight of the Bumblebee" by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov
A fast-paced orchestral piece that mimics the frantic, buzzing flight of a bumblebee.

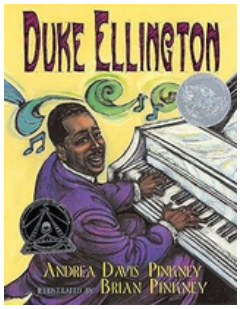
"Moonlight Sonata" by Ludwig van Beethoven
A deeply expressive piano piece, known for its hauntingly calm first movement that evokes a quiet, reflective night.

"Best Year Yet" by the James Jackson Jazz Trio
A jazz piece perfect for cozying up with a good book.

"Attitude" by IVE
This upbeat track is great for setting a positive tone while tackling cleaning or preparing for a big event.

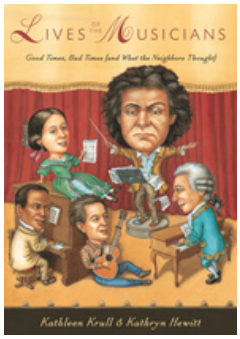
© 2025 The Children's Hour

Book & Film List



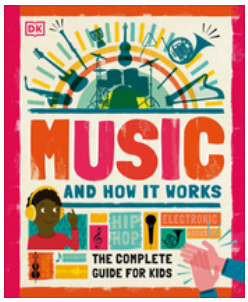
Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra
by Andrea Davis Pinkney, illustrated by Brian Pinkney

This picture book bursts with jazzy rhythm and vivid artwork, celebrating the life and music of a legendary jazz composer and performer.
ages 2-8



Lives of the Musicians: Good Times, Bad Times (and What the Neighbors Thought)
by Kathleen Krull

This collection offers short, engaging, and often funny biographies of famous composers like Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Clara Schumann.
ages 8-12



Music and How it Works: The Complete Guide for Kids
by DK

TA detailed, visually rich guide that explores music fundamentals—from theory and instruments to composition.
ages 8-12



The Dragon Quest: A Music Composition Adventure
by Ben Ereddia

A story-driven activity book that teaches music notation and composition through fun challenges and imaginative adventures.
ages 6+



Piece by Piece
by Morgan Neville and Pharrell Williams

Blending an unconventional documentary style with vibrant storytelling, this colorful look at Pharrell Williams's career celebrates creativity and the power of believing in yourself.
PG

© 2025 The Children's Hour