MAJOR AND MINOR—WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?

CURRICULUM

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WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

This guide is designed to prepare, reinforce and extend learning concepts and ideas from the Class Notes video Major and Minor—What’s the Difference? The information and standards-based activities are intended to engage students through music learning. We hope you will personalize, modify or adjust content to meet the needs of your unique classroom.

There are three fundamental objectives of this video:

1. Students will understand that major and minor tonalities have expressive and emotional connotations.
2. Students will demonstrate an understanding of half steps and whole steps, and that combinations of half and whole steps form major and minor scales.
3. Students will understand that composers can use major and minor scales as “ingredients” to create the kind of music they want.

This curriculum is separated into three sections, each designed to address one of the three objectives above.

PREPARING TO WATCH THE VIDEO

Just as literacy teachers use prereading strategies, music teachers can use prelistening and prewatching strategies. This helps students create a mental framework to organize new ideas, relate new content to prior knowledge and make connections. What you bring to a listening experience will affect what you hear and take away from that experience.

1. Introduce and discuss the idea that music expresses different emotions. Create an emotion-gauge or “emo-meter” for students to use while listening to music. Fill each quadrant with adjectives of your choice. Add an arrow that spins.

HOW DOES THIS MUSIC MAKE YOU FEEL?

[Diagram showing emotion gauges]
The following pieces work well for this exercise. Find audio for these pieces on the Class Notes: Major and Minor—What’s the Difference? Lesson Plan Audio page.

- *Night on Bald Mountain*, Modest Mussorgsky
- Hungarian Dance No. 5, Johannes Brahms
- *Black Angels*, George Crumb
- *The Tides of Manaunaun*, Henry Cowell
- *Trois pieces*, Nadia Boulanger
- “Mars, the Bringer of War” from *The Planets*, Gustav Holst
- *Allegro Barbaro*, Béla Bartók
- Prelude Op. 23 No. 5 in G minor, Sergei Rachmaninov
- *Five Preludes for Guitar*, Heitor Villa-Lobos
- *Méditation de Thaïs*, Jules Massenet
- Trio for flute, violin, and piano, Nino Rota
- Prelude No. 1, George Gershwin
- *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*, Krzysztof Penderecki
- Serenade No. 10, *Gran Partita*—III. Adagio, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
- “Dance of the Knights” from *Romeo and Juliet*, Sergei Prokofiev
- “Humming Chorus” from *Madame Butterfly*, Giacomo Puccini

The following pieces are used as examples in the Class Notes video. Use these for any major/minor listening activities. Find audio for these pieces on the Class Notes: Major and Minor—What’s the Difference? Lesson Plan Audio page.

- Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, Op. 47 — IV. Allegro non troppo, Dmitri Shostakovich. Note that at the very end, the final chord shifts to a triumphant D Major chord.
- Élégie for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 24, Gabriel Fauré
- Fugue No. 3 in C# Major from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I — (BWV 848), J.S. Bach
- Nocturne in E minor, Op.72 No.1, Frédéric Chopin

2. Introduce the vocabulary major and minor. Explain that these are two kinds of scales (or simply two groups of notes) that composers use as tools to create certain kinds of moods, feelings, atmosphere or intensity in music.

   a. Dig a little further into major. Play or sing a major scale and explain that the overall mood or feeling conveyed by major scales is usually happy, excited or enthusiastic. Play a few very familiar major melodies, like “Happy Birthday” or “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” A good way to remember the definition of major’s mood is to sing the following words to the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”:

   *Here’s a major melody, joyful, bright and happy.*
b. Now explore *minor*. You may select one of the same simple melodies mentioned above in item “a” and lower the third to alter the melody slightly and make it into a minor melody. To the tune of “Greensleeves,” sing:

*A minor tune can be sorrowful, spooky or just thoughtful.*

c. Have a major/minor listening party. Create major and minor flash cards—with major represented by a smiley face and minor by a sad face. Listen to a variety of music and flash whichever card you think describes the overall mood.

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**REFORCE IDEAS AND CONCEPTS FROM THE VIDEO THROUGH ACTIVE LEARNING**

1. Understanding half steps and whole steps is a crucial part of understanding how major and minor scales are constructed. In order to cultivate and reinforce this concept, play “Half/Whole” on a giant keyboard.

Begin by explaining that on a keyboard, a half step is the very next key, black or white. Using construction paper or butcher paper, create a giant keyboard to place on the floor.

Mark the first key “Start” and ask a student to stand at the starting line. Say “half” or “whole” and ask them to step forward accordingly, either to the very next key, black or white (if you say “half”) or two keys (if you say “whole”).

This game can be modified and adapted in many ways. Choose a selection of intervals to use in your game. Ask a student to stand on a second, third, fourth or fifth. Anything more than that might be too much of a stretch. (Literally. This turns the activity into a game of Twister.) If you are working on learning note names on the keyboard, modify the game by asking students to step on C, G, F#, B♭ etc.
2. Build some scales! Review the concept that scales are created by putting together a combination of half and whole steps. Start with major. Explain that the combination of whole (W) and half (H) steps in a major scale is:

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W W H W W W W H
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Map it out on a staff to get a visual picture. Observe the symbols for half and whole step. Say it and play it to reinforce the visual with a corollary listening experience.

Re-create the pattern starting on a different note. This is a great opportunity to review and practice using sharps and flats.

Then learn/review the pattern for minor:

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W H W W H W W W
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Say it, play it, compare it to the major pattern. For visual comparison:

Play a game where two contestants come up to the board. Each has a blank staff in front of her. Name a clef, at which each contestant must then draw the appropriate symbol. Name a starting note and a type of scale. For example, “E major.” The contestants must then construct the scale. Adjust for difficulty or allow students to use a cheat sheet with the whole step/half step pattern for each kind of scale.
EXTEND LEARNING WITH PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES

These activities help students understand that composers can use major and minor scales as “ingredients” to create the kind of music they want. These activities also synthesize many of the concepts discussed above and help students integrate concepts for further mastery.

1. Begin by doing some listening to specific pieces by specific composers. Make a listening chart or listening journal that has a place to note tonality. (NOTE: You’ll also find a printable listening chart in the PRINT PAGES section at the end of this guide.)

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After or during the exercise, ask students why they think the composer decided to use major or minor. By asking the question, you start to draw the connection to the composer’s intentions. See the list on page 3 of this guide for suggested repertoire. Find audio of these pieces on the Class Notes: Major and Minor—What’s the Difference? Lesson Plan Audio page.

2. Tell students that now they will be the composer. To begin, students will only create one piece, so you just need one row below each column heading.

First, ask them to write their own name in the composer box, then fill in the adjective box with several descriptive words and possibly a title. Alternatively, giving a title could be the very last step. Then they should decide if they want to use the notes from a major scale or a minor scale to convey their chosen mood and mark their box accordingly.

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Once the conception and tonality of the piece has been established, give students time to create their piece. Provide whatever tools are needed to adjust to students’ skill level. For example, use an Orff instrument with just the C major scale or a minor scale bars in place. If you have a piano or keyboard, mark the appropriate keys with tape so students know which notes are available to them. In order to ensure an understanding that major and minor describe tonal music, make sure to include at least one melodic instrument. Student composers may add auxiliary percussion to underscore the mood and atmospheric quality of their compositions.

Students can choose to notate the creations or simply experiment with the selected scale notes. This activity is easily adapted for students to work in pairs or small groups. Record or perform the finished works.
RELATED CLASS NOTES VIDEOS

Several Class Notes videos relate to the study of major and minor. Class Notes: A Journey through Musical Emotion takes students through a series of musical works that display a spectrum of emotions.

A companion video, Class Notes: A Recipe for Emotion in Music covers some of the tools and strategies composers use to create music that evokes certain feelings in listeners.

LEARNING CHECKLIST

☐ I can identify an emotion experienced when singing, playing instruments or listening to music.
☐ I can create or improvise melodic phrases using specified tonalities.
☐ I can perform music by accurately responding to musical terms.
☐ I can describe how musical elements contribute to meaning in a musical selection.
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