

# CMP Teaching Plan: John Henry

Title: John Henry                      Composer:  
Ensemble: String Orchestra        Arranger: Carrie Lane Gruselle  
Performance level: 7th grade        Publisher: Highland Etling, 1998

## Music Selection

- musical description of a story
- ties into storytelling theme of concert
- challenges-syncoption and finger patterns
- interesting parts for all instruments

## Analysis

**Type of piece:** Arrangement of American folksong

### **Musical elements**

#### **Form:**

1-5    slow intro.

5-9    intro.

9-19   1st verse in I; train engine “chugging” sounds in vla/vc/cb

19-29   2nd verse in vla; ostinato pizz in vc, scales and ostinato pizz in I/II

30-41   train sounds with motives from the melody

41-47   3rd verse (partial) melody in vc/cb; 8th note motives in I/II/vla

47-56   slow ending of verse 3

#### **Melody:**

Falls within an octave range from B-B. Based on 5 notes of the scale (D, E, F nat, G, B) and is 10 bars long. Uses mostly quarter and eighth notes and contains syncopation.

#### **Harmony:**

Harmony uses G major, A minor, F major chords predominantly

#### **Expression:**

Dynamics range from mp to ff with occasional cresc. and decresc. markings

#### **Timbre:**

Colors change as the melody moves to different registers and accompaniment changes from arco to pizz to ostinato and addition of grace notes.

#### **Texture:**

Opening and closing textures are full and more homophonic in nature. Middle section has independent parts and thins out at times when only low or high strings are playing, and when there is interplay between the parts.

### **Other compositional devices**

- musical foreshadowing--introductory part introduces some melodic material developed in faster section and also hints at the ending.
- contrary motion (m. 27)
- motivic development

### **Musical/cultural traditions and historical connections**

- American folk music
- storytelling/tall tales
- Westward expansion/building of the railroads

### **What is the “heart” of this piece?**

The way the arrangement is crafted to tell the story

### **Outcome #1**

Students will develop accuracy in placing fingers for E flat-E natural, B flat-B natural, F natural-F sharp finger combinations and the enharmonic spellings of them.

### **Strategies**

- A. Class will discuss how to play these combinations in various registers on their instruments (high/low fingers, placement on the fingerboard, placement relative to other fingers/notes).
- B. During warm-ups, students will play patterns that alternate between notes in a combination (i.e. D-E-F-G; D-E flat-F-G). Students will play the patterns in small groups and will assess/self-assess accuracy of intonation and offer solutions to inaccuracies.
- C. Students will work in pairs to develop a warm-up focusing on one of the finger placement combinations. They can develop their own or adapt it from their music. Each pair will lead their warm-up.
- D. Class will discuss the term “enharmonic” and add it to their definition page of the portfolio. The students will re-write their warm-up above using an enharmonic spelling of the note they focused on.

### **Assessment**

- participation in class discussion
- self-assessment of accuracy during warm-ups
- effectiveness of the warm-up they develop
- ability to use an enharmonic spelling in their warm-up

### **Outcome #2**

Students will explore the folklore and historical background of the ballad “John Henry.”

## Strategies

- A. A student will read the story of John Henry to the class. Have students discuss what they know about the building of the railroads in the U.S. Have students research one of 3 topics: tall tales, John Henry folktale, or railroad building. Students will complete a sheet listing their sources and what they found.
- B. Students will sing the verses to John Henry and discuss the aspects of the song that are characteristic of folktales/tall tales/ ballads. Students will share their research with the class as it applies to the story of John Henry.
- C. Students will organize their materials so that they can be given to the storyteller who will be telling the story of John Henry at the concert. Their materials must be legible and complete, and must relate to the story.

## Assessment

participation in class discussion  
independent research-quality of work  
participation in singing and discussion of the ballad  
organization and completeness of materials for storyteller

## Outcome #3

Students will examine compositional devices to understand how the arranger tells the story musically.

## Strategies

- A. Students will play the following measures and attempt to define or describe what is happening:

6-15	vla/vc/cb	train wheels speeding up
19-22	vc	ostinato pattern; steady train movement
32-33	all	train wheels/whistle
47-56	all	slow melody portraying “died with a hammer in his hand”
- B. Students will identify the verses in the arrangement and write this in their part. They will play the accompaniment parts of each of these verses and identify what techniques the arranger is using or what the music is trying to portray (see above).
- C. Students will play each verse of the piece and decide what part of the ballad is being told. Students will discuss what clues the arranger gives to the listener and how effective these clues are.

## Assessment

- participation in class discussion
- self-assessment of accuracy during warm-ups
- effectiveness of the warm-up they develop
- ability to use an enharmonic spelling in their warm-up