**Nixon’s Visit to China**

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Objectives:

1. Students will understand how Nixon’s visit to China impacts the United States today.
2. Students will understand the implications of Nixon’s visit in his time.
3. Students will recognize music and other art forms as important first and secondhand sources when analyzing historical events.
4. Students will be able to describe music using musical vocabulary on the musical and expressive planes.
5. Students will begin to listen actively to music in their daily lives.

Correlated SOLs

Standards USII strands:

1a, 1b, 1c, 1d, 1e, 1f, 1g, 1h, 1i, 8c, 8e, and 9d,

Overview

The following lesson presents Nixon’s visit to China in February of 1972 through the secondary source of John Adam’s opera *Nixon in China.* Students will be asked to listen to selected excerpts and interpret what they hear. These interpretations will then be used to illuminate different facets of Nixon’s visit including: what it meant for China, what it meant for the United States, what lasting implications does it have now, and what were some barriers that had to be overcome before the visit was successful.

Materials

Accompanying worksheet found below,

Access to the music from the opera

(YouTube link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_kVc8mrElg> )

Online access to the written form of the libretto

<http://www.opera-arias.com/adams/nixon-in-china/libretto/>

**Introduction (15 Minutes)**

Ask what the students can tell you about Nixon’s visit to China in 1972. This will give a baseline of the previously known knowledge and give an idea of what material should be covered more in-depth with that particular class. After listening to information students already know and dismissing any false preconceptions a review of the worksheet is in order. Many students may not have ever been asked to analyze music like this before, so introducing some musical terminology and explaining certain sections on the sheet are imperative to the success of the lesson. The selections chosen for this lesson were also chosen for their minimalist style. This type of music is fairly simple allowing students to better hear individual parts that make up a piece without the challenge that complex rhythms, harmonies, and structures can pose.

Hand out the worksheet and begin explaining the first chart. The sections include the four elements of music (Copland 26). The first element discussed is rhythm. Under this section, students should take note of whether the music has a fast or slow pace. Students should also listen to see if any instrument(s) are playing the rhythm or holding a rhythmic pattern throughout the piece (Copland 27). The second section is tone color or *timbre* (pronounced tamber). This is the quality of sound which gives each instrument an individual sound even when playing the same note (Copland 63). Students should listen for different instruments played in the piece and list them. Students may also give certain qualities to each instrument part here. For example a flute may have played many high notes. That would be an excellent note for this section. The third section is where notes on harmony should be written (Copeland 60). First identify if there is a harmony to the piece. If it makes the piece sound cohesive and like the notes blend well the harmony is said to be consonant. If the chords or notes seem to clash then the harmony is most likely dissonant. Finally there is the section on melody. Notes taken under this category should include whether there is a melody at all. If there is a melody, describe how it moves and whether it makes large leaps or moves in small steps. Some pieces may have more than one melody which is called polyphonic (Copland 40).

As each term is explained it may be helpful to write them up on the board for use while students listen to the music being played. Encourage any students with more formal musical training to use their musical vocabulary to expand upon any of these points. For those who have little to no musical training make sure to emphasize that the notes taken are more important than necessarily using the exact vocabulary to express the idea. The most important point to stress is that students should be actively listening for different parts of the music.

Moving on to the second chart, students should be listening for the emotional value present in all music. In this section students should try to become conscious of how the music affects them. The first section is for distinct feelings music may give you. Is it happy, creepy, dark, ominous, silly, lighthearted, or sad? Music runs the gamut of emotional value so think of these as possible examples but by no means as exhaustive list. Another point of interest is how the interaction of parts makes one feel. Is there tension and conflict between different instruments? The second section has a more poetic sense of description attached. This is the section where students would describe if a scene, place, idea, or context came to mind while listening. Does the music make you think of something in particular? Is it music one might hear in a particular movie, or you might associate with a specific landscape, or culture? These are the kinds of questions students should ask themselves and attempt to answer in the boxes. The final box is for anything a student may notice that does not fall into the provided categories as there are many more areas of music not provided for. For example, form is a large part of musical analysis, but it is useless to talk about if the students are unfamiliar with at least a small variety of different structures music can take. Also encourage students to attempt to explain why the music produces the effect and what choice the composer made to create that emotional value (Copland 9).

One important part of this lesson is to solidify students’ understanding of how intentional composers are when writing music. In a review of John Adam’s many works it is stated that “He is not simply a current events composer, using music to retell and narrate important historical moments, but rather an artist commenting on events that have shaped American political and social culture” (Reiter). Every action by the composer has an effect on the listener and is therefore intentionally combined to create a desired change within the listener. Adams is a particularly great composer to study because of his “continuing interest in operas that marry recent sociopolitical subjects with the poetical ruminations that theater can offer” recreating a firsthand experience of historical events for those who were not there themselves (Haskins 2).

**Listening (30 Minutes)**

Now that the charts have been explained and questions from the students have been answered, it is time to move into the opera itself. Before listen to the selected excerpts from the opera, one may wish to give a brief synopsis of the opera so the students have a context in which to listen and they can read a text version of the libretto before listening so that the vocal part can be understood and the music can be fully focused on. The opera *Nixon in China* closely follows the events of the historical visit Nixon made to China. The opening scene from which the first excerpt is taken contains a dialogue between Nixon and Chao a Chinese military officer who first greets him upon landing in China. The second act follows Mao, the Chinese Communist leader of China, his wife, and the Nixon couple as they explore China. The third and final act from which the last two excerpts are taken focuses mainly on the discussions Mao and Nixon had on foreign relations between their countries during the historical visit. It is also important to know that the opera itself was highly researched and has been deemed highly accurate and representative of the real visit to China making it a valid primary source for historical as well as musical analysis. Note that the times given for the opera selections correlate to the link given in materials and may vary depending on where the music is sourced from. It is also suggested that the students listen to each piece at least twice, once for each chart, so that they can start to dissect individual components of the composition.

The first selection to be discussed is excerpt one from the beginning of the opera when Nixon and Chinese soldiers begin to sing at once. This section is from 19:50 to 21:11. Students should notice the presence of high pitched wind instruments, constant lower pitched strings and a harpsicord playing from low to high volume and pitch. This section contains several melodies and a lot of supporting material. However these elements seem to clash against each other. The harpsicord has almost an improvised feel similar to that of American jazz music while the strings instruments and the singing chorus have a slow precise rhythm from which they do not deviate. These juxtaposed rhythms and instrumentations create a sense of tension and a disjointed feeling overall.

Similarities can be drawn to how the two countries perceived each other. About two years before the meeting, “Mao Zedong issued a statement calling on all people of the world to unite together to defeat the aggressors of American imperialism and its running-dog” so neither country was really seeing eye to eye the expected results of the visit by Nixon himself were “no change” (Warner 2). Neither country was expecting real results from this meeting. Like the differences in music, the two cultures were very different from numerous standpoints. In a professional review of the opera the “superimposed scales” or differences in music quality and instrumentation “place the opera in more sober surroundings, ones tinged with ambiguity” (Guerin 3). America was a capitalist nation with elections every four years while China had recently turned communist and had one political party. No one at the time thought relations would become anything more than lukewarm because the two nations were not operating in similar ways. Similarly, the instruments each appear to be making their own music versus one harmonious piece. This section therefore highlights differences in culture which led to the uncertainty of how the meeting would proceed as the two viewpoints collided.

The second selection of music is from 36:00 to 37:30. This excerpt starts with low winds, brass and repetitive strings. Slowly the lower pitched sections fade as the higher pitched winds build in volume and rise in pitch. This music is strikingly different from the previous selection since it starts rather hopefully. The rising strings create a hopeful atmosphere which was not present earlier. About halfway through the selection the music makes a quick transition to a more militaristic style with the main instruments switching from wind and string to percussion. Although this composition changes drastically throughout, there is only one main part making the section as a whole homophonic. Similarly there is a disconnect between the two cultures in their needs and wants. Many Chinese of the time wished to become isolationist to avoid the many influences pouring in from trade because there was fear that their culture would be traded with the products. However the United States was hopeful to reestablish connections with China to prevent future conflict between the two countries during the Cold War which is represented by the drums. The meeting serves as one of the only binding aspects between them just as the one main part serves to connect the radically different styles into one piece. This foreshadows the ultimate success of the meeting.

One of the many outcomes of the visit was that the United States did not have to fear the Chinese as a Cold War threat because the countries had a better relationship than the United States and the Soviet Union. Citizens of both countries had plenty to fear from each “as both the Soviets and the Chinese were declared opponents of the United States and the free world” and therefore enemies at least in a political sense (Bostdorff 38). This visit also happened to coincide with important decisions regarding the Vietnam War a conflict which had each country on opposing sides much like the transition separates the hopeful winds and steady drums. Once the section has concluded students may also notice how the piece maintains a quick rhythm throughout the selection. The rhythmic relationship of the two sections is representative of “the budding relationship between the two nations” while the quickness itself highlights the “the precariousness and urgency of these talks” (Thomas 124). In this way Adams foreshadows the enormous current economic connection between China and the United States which began in the decades after Nixon’s visit. Although the two countries do not agree on many other policies, there is an underlying connection between them.

The third and final selection of music happens to be the last minute of the opera. The characters have finished their parts, but the music continues giving a unique insight to the results of the visit. This selection is minimalistic in style, especially when compared to the complexity of the other two sections. There is a single main part with minimal consonant support. The main tone color is of strings with some lower wind instruments rounding out the lower pitched supporting material. The section is uncharacteristically quiet in volume and the main sting instrument slowly climbs up in pitch. However, unlike the typical triumphant ending the audience expects, Adam intentionally leaves the listener with a less conclusive feeling as if the violin was reaching for a high note it moved toward but never found. This stretching upward of notes is symbolic of “the democratizing of genre and the globalizing of influence” that began when Nixon visited China (Powell 3). After the Cold War had ended, China and the United States had a transfer of products and some culture as the world as a whole moved towards globalization. Although this is the result seen today, the music brings the listener back in time to just after the meeting when tension had subsided and progress had been made, but no clear path had been drawn as for the future nature of Chinese-American relations. Just as the music never really gave a sense of closure, relations between the United States and China are still evolving never having reached a stable consensus as to how the countries should interact. The empty space between the high main melody and low accompaniment serves as an indication that growth in warming relations will be made after the meeting to help fill in the hollow space between notes.

**Conclusion (10 Minutes)**

As a final activity to help wrap up the lesson on John Adam’s opera and Nixon’s visit to China, the students should review any notes they took which may not have previously been reviewed within the lesson. In small groups have the students come up with different aspects of the historical event Adam may be alluding to. Each group should come up with a spokesperson that will briefly summarize the group’s thoughts. Since music is an abstract art form, there may be many different interpretations of what was heard, so allowing students to respectfully suggest different views on the same sections of music present by each group is a great way to explore the multitude of possibilities in a short amount of time.

To close out the class have a discussion on how current music can illuminate different facets of current events and how music is a great source for historical analysis. An interesting point to include in discussion would be if there is any music the students are familiar with that may speak to some of the current effects resonating from Nixon’s original visit and international policy as a whole.

**A Note**

The interpretations within this lesson present only one of many different possible thoughts on the opera *Nixon in China*. It is by no means meant to be the absolute or only correct interpretation of Adam’s music. This is simply one take on how the composer illuminated important facts surrounding Nixon’s visit to China and the visits current effects of American-Chinese relations.

Works Cited

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