



Smithsonian Folkways

Performing Ethiopia: Playing, Singing and Improvising Music from the Abyssian Kingdom A Smithsonian Folkways Lesson

Designed by: Brian Woolford
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Summary:

Students will be introduced to the music of Ethiopia through several activities including listening, analyzing, and performing. They will perform arrangements on various instruments, playing intact and together, and will use this material to improvise and compose their own music. Students will become familiar with the Ethiopian Begena, a low pitched stringed instrument that resembles a large lyre.

Suggested Grade Levels: 6-8, 9-12

Country: Ethiopia

Region: Northeast Africa ('The Horn')

Culture Group: Tigrai, Somali

Genre: World

Instruments: Begena (Ethiopian string instrument that resembles a large lyre), Voice, Orchestra

Language: Undocumented

Co-Curricular Areas: Social Studies

National Standards: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9

Prerequisites: None

Objectives:

- Understanding the music of Ethiopian Culture
- Basic knowledge of Ethiopian geography, history, and food
- Basic understanding of improvisation
- Basic concepts dealing with musical form

Materials:

- "Personal Song" from *Folk Music and Ceremonies of Ethiopia* (FW04354)
<http://www.folkways.si.edu/folk-music-and-ceremonies-of-ethiopia/world/album/smithsonian>
- Liner notes "Folk Music and Ceremonies of Ethiopia" (FW04354)
- Map of Ethiopia
- Map of the African continent
- Picture of Emperor Haile Selassie I

- “I Beg You, Heart” from *Folk Music of Ethiopia* (FWO4405)
<http://www.folkways.si.edu/folk-music-of-ethiopia/islamica-world/album/smithsonian>
- Picture of the Begena

Lesson Segments:

- 1. Making Sense of an Ethiopian “Personal Song”** (National Standards 1, 2, 5, 6, 9)
- 2. The Musical Complexities of “I Beg You Heart”** (National Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9)

1. Making Sense of an Ethiopian “Personal Song”

- Play the recording of “Personal Song” from “Folk Music and Ceremonies of Ethiopia”.
 - Ask students to listen and describe what they are hearing
 - Who is singing? Answer: A woman in a crowd
 - Where are we? Answer: Ethiopia
 - What clues do we have? Answer: Language, first word is “Haile Selassie”
 - Ask students to focus on these questions
 - Is there a steady beat? Answer: There is a beat but it seems non-metrical at times
 - Are there repeated melodic ideas? Answer: Yes, m.5-7 she repeats a rhythmic phrase
 - What does the singer do to certain notes? Answer: She ornaments them by sliding to a higher note and back
 - Direct students to
 - “Draw” with their fingers the high and low pitches of the melody
 - Try to sing along with the recording
- Explain the setting of the performance of “Personal Song”.
- Using a map:
 - Point out the location of Ethiopia, and name the countries and bodies of water nearby (Egypt, Somalia, Eritrea, the Sudan, the Red Sea)
 - Point out the Somali Region of Ethiopia (this region is on the east coast of Ethiopia bordering Somalia and is where the “Personal Song” was recorded)
- Discuss the setting of the text.
 - It was recorded at the Emperor’s birthday festival
 - It is a song of praise for Emperor Haile Selassie I
- Play recording again but this time listen for the Emperors name (first phrase)
 - Traditional chant of the pastoral Somali people
 - About the simple virtues of life and how good it is to be alive

- f. Distribute transcription for “Personal Song” (Figure 1) and sing or perform on instruments.
 - i. Sing the melody on a neutral syllable such as ‘la’ or ‘loo’
 - 1. Try singing on different syllables
 - 2. Try to emulate embellished notes
 - ii. Discuss pitch material
 - 1. Pentatonic scale
 - iii. Discuss complications with transcriptions
 - 1. Flexible rhythm and time
 - 2. Possible microtonal

Assessment: Are students able to discuss the material in an age appropriate manner?
Are students able to perform the transcription accurately?

2. The Musical Complexities of I Beg You Heart

- a. Play “I Beg You, Heart” From *Folk Music of Ethiopia* (FWO4405) several times.
 - i. With each repeated listening ask students to listen for something new:
 - 1. Timbre
 - 2. Metrical/Nonmetrical
 - 3. Instruments
 - 4. Vocal quality
 - 5. Harmony
 - 6. Listen only to the voice or vice-versa
- b. Discuss the meaning of the text.

“I beg you heart,
Get accustomed to it.
I have no family.
I beg you heart,
I have no family,
So be you my family
I beg you, heart,
I have no refuge,
So be you my cavern to live in.”
- c. Have the students brainstorm the appearance of the Begena as they listen to it.
 - i. Show a picture of the Begena
 - ii. Sing the scale on the Begena (Figure 3)
 - iii. Explain that it is a Lyre instrument
 - iv. Talk about the timbre and the buzz it creates
 - v. Discuss its 10 strings
 - 1. Only 6 are used to produce sound
 - 2. Other four are for resting the finger after it has struck
 - vi. Discuss the instruments spiritual importance
 - vii. Explain that it was played by noblemen, monks, and upper class

- d.** Look at the score while listening to the recording.
 - i.** What makes notating a challenging task?
 - 1.** Performers liberal sense of time
 - 2.** Possibility of improvised vocals
 - 3.** Metrically different from most western music
 - 4.** Microtonal
- e.** Talk about dissonance.
 - i.** Does this recording sound dissonant to you?
 - 1.** Why or why not?
 - 2.** Could it be cultural?
- f.** Perform “I Beg You, Heart”.
 - i.** First only perform the Begena part (Figure 2)
 - 1.** Unison or Solo
 - 2.** First Pizzicato then Arco
 - 3.** Experiment with tempo
 - 4.** Try rubato
 - ii.** Add vocal melody over the Begena Part (Figure 4)
 - 1.** Double Bass and Cello play Begena pizzicato
 - 2.** Violin and Viola play the melody arco
- g.** Improvise and Compose using the Begena scale (Figure 3).
 - i.** Sing the scale
 - 1.** Ascending/descending
 - 2.** Using different intervallic patterns
 - 3.** Using interesting rhythms
- h.** Individual improvisation.
 - i.** Solo improvisation
 - ii.** Over rhythmic accompaniment (clapping, drumming)
 - iii.** Over a drone, experiment using different notes from the scale
- i.** Small group improvisation (groups of two or three).
 - i.** Things to keep in mind
 - 1.** Create a musical discussion with your partner
 - 2.** Think musical question and answers
 - 3.** Experiment with dynamics
 - 4.** Try to create a form (ABA etc.)
 - 5.** Ask yourself who is creating a melody and who is creating accompaniment?
 - 6.** In time/out of time
 - 7.** Silence is music too!
 - ii.** Try to use guidelines to bring coherence
 - 1.** Only short notes
 - 2.** Only three note phrases
 - iii.** If the group is larger than three
 - 1.** Have no more than three playing at once
 - 2.** Try to have students listen and decide on the spot when to come in or drop out
 - iv.** After improvising a piece make sure to discuss certain key points
 - 1.** What did you like or dislike about the piece?

Figure 1:

Personal Song

Arr. Brian Woolford

Traditional Chant

Soprano

The musical score for the Soprano part is written on three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a 3/8 time signature, and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It contains five measures: the first measure has a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note Bb4; the second measure has a quarter note Bb4, a quarter note C5, and a quarter note D5; the third measure has a quarter note E5, a quarter note F5, and a quarter note G5; the fourth measure has a quarter note A5, a quarter note B5, and a quarter note C6; the fifth measure has a quarter note D6, a quarter note E6, and a quarter note F6. The second staff starts with a 4/4 time signature and contains five measures: the first measure has a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note Bb4, and a quarter note C5; the second measure has a quarter note D5, a quarter note E5, a quarter note F5, and a quarter note G5; the third measure has a quarter note A5, a quarter note B5, a quarter note C6, and a quarter note D6; the fourth measure has a quarter note E6, a quarter note F6, a quarter note G6, and a quarter note A6; the fifth measure has a quarter note B6, a quarter note C7, a quarter note D7, and a quarter note E7. The third staff contains five measures: the first measure has a quarter note F6, a quarter note G6, a quarter note A6, and a quarter note B6; the second measure has a quarter note C7, a quarter note D7, a quarter note E7, and a quarter note F7; the third measure has a quarter note G7, a quarter note A7, a quarter note B7, and a quarter note C8; the fourth measure has a quarter note D8, a quarter note E8, a quarter note F8, and a quarter note G8; the fifth measure has a quarter note A8, a quarter note B8, a quarter note C9, and a quarter note D9. There are triplets of eighth notes in measures 3 and 4 of the first staff, and measure 3 of the second staff. Measure 4 of the second staff contains a quarter rest followed by a sixteenth note G5. Measure 7 of the third staff contains a quarter rest followed by a sixteenth note G5.

Note: 16th notes should be swung

Figure 2:

I Beg Your Heart

Score

Arr. Brian Woolford

Ethiopia

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system includes staves for Violin, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The second system includes staves for Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Double Bass (D.B.).

System 1:

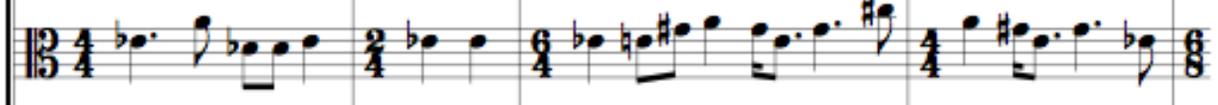
- Violin:** Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. Starts with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note Bb, then a series of eighth notes: Bb, A, G, F, E, D, C, B.
- Viola:** Alto clef, 4/4 time signature. Starts with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note Bb, then a series of eighth notes: Bb, A, G, F, E, D, C, B.
- Cello:** Bass clef, 4/4 time signature. Starts with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note Bb, then a series of eighth notes: Bb, A, G, F, E, D, C, B.
- Double Bass:** Bass clef, 4/4 time signature. Starts with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note Bb, then a series of eighth notes: Bb, A, G, F, E, D, C, B.

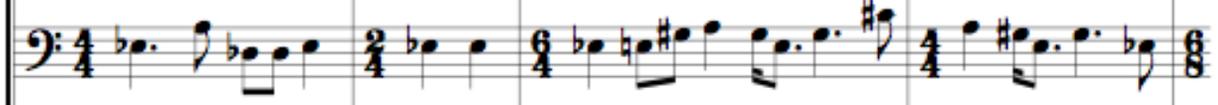
System 2 (Measures 5-8):

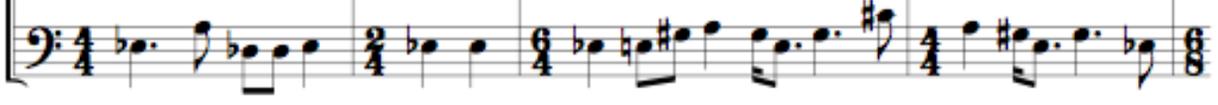
- Vln.:** Treble clef. Measure 5: 3/8 time signature, notes E, F, G, A. Measure 6: 4/4 time signature, notes B, A, G, F. Measure 7: 3/4 time signature, notes E, D, C, B. Measure 8: 4/4 time signature, notes A, G, F, E.
- Vla.:** Alto clef. Measure 5: 3/8 time signature, notes B, A, G, F. Measure 6: 4/4 time signature, notes E, D, C, B. Measure 7: 3/4 time signature, notes A, G, F, E. Measure 8: 4/4 time signature, notes D, C, B, A.
- Vc.:** Bass clef. Measure 5: 3/8 time signature, notes B, A, G, F. Measure 6: 4/4 time signature, notes E, D, C, B. Measure 7: 3/4 time signature, notes A, G, F, E. Measure 8: 4/4 time signature, notes D, C, B, A.
- D.B.:** Bass clef. Measure 5: 3/8 time signature, notes B, A, G, F. Measure 6: 4/4 time signature, notes E, D, C, B. Measure 7: 3/4 time signature, notes A, G, F, E. Measure 8: 4/4 time signature, notes D, C, B, A.

9

Vln. 

Vla. 

Vc. 

D.B. 

13

Vln. 

Vla. 

Vc. 

D.B. 

Figure 4:

I Beg Your Heart

Score

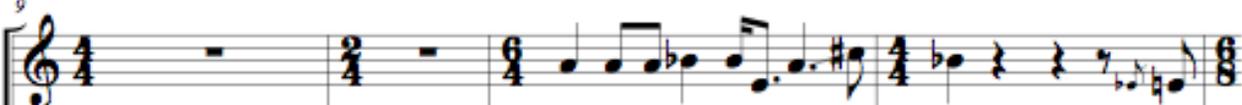
Arr. Brian Woolford

Ethiopia

Musical score for Violin, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass, measures 1-5. The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The Violin and Viola parts are mostly rests, with some notes in the final measure. The Cello and Double Bass parts play a rhythmic pattern of eighth and quarter notes.

Musical score for Violin, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass, measures 6-10. The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The Violin and Viola parts are mostly rests, with some notes in the final measure. The Cello and Double Bass parts play a rhythmic pattern of eighth and quarter notes.

9

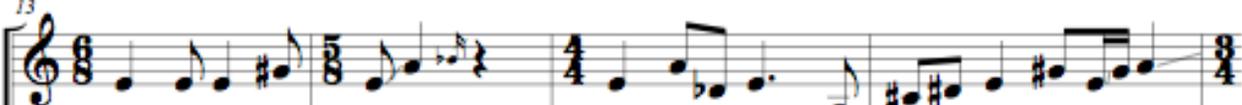
Vln. 

Vla. 

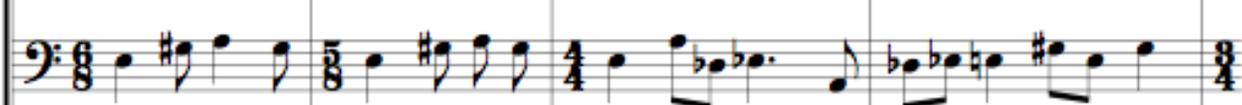
Vc. 

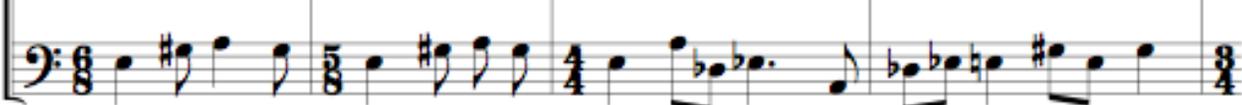
D.B. 

13

Vln. 

Vla. 

Vc. 

D.B. 

I Beg Your Heart

17

Vln.

Vla.

Vc.

D.B.

Detailed description: This musical score shows measures 17, 18, and 19 for four instruments: Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Double Bass (D.B.). Measure 17 is in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Measure 18 changes to 4/4 time. Measure 19 changes to 2/4 time. The Violin and Viola parts play a melodic line starting with a quarter note F#4, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, and Bb4 in measure 17. In measure 18, they play a descending eighth-note line: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, Bb3. In measure 19, the Violin part has a whole rest, while the Viola part has a whole note Bb3. The Violoncello and Double Bass parts play a similar descending eighth-note line in measure 17: G3, F#3, E3, D3, C3, Bb2. In measure 18, they play a dotted half note Bb2. In measure 19, they play a dotted half note Bb2.