



**sydney symphony orchestra**

David Robertson Chief Conductor and Artistic Director

# Bite-Sized Music Lessons

**A series of F-10 music lessons for  
implementation in the classroom**

## **Conditions of use**

These Materials are freely available for download and educational use.

These resources were developed by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra with funding and support from the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and Education.



Education  
Services  
Australia

# Variations on a Shaker Melody (1944)

---

## Aaron Copland

Duration: approximately 2:43 minutes

### Year levels: Years 5-6

Written in the language of the Australian Curriculum in the Arts these resources include activities in each of the music learning areas: performing, composing and listening and identify the key competencies reinforced in each activity.

| Lesson | Page              | Focus Activity         |
|--------|-------------------|------------------------|
| 1      | <a href="#">4</a> | Listening              |
| 2      | <a href="#">6</a> | Reading and performing |
| 3      | <a href="#">8</a> | Performing             |
| 4      | <a href="#">9</a> | Composing              |

### Lesson Index

- Lesson 1:** Students become familiar with the folk song *The Lord of the Dance* that forms the main musical material of this piece. They will recognise it in Copland's work and identify musical features of it.
- Lesson 2:** Students begin to unpack the way that Copland has manipulated the elements of music to create a series of musical variations based upon the song *The Lord of the Dance* from Lesson 1. It also introduces rhythm patterns and how the length of notes can be doubled or halved and the musical effect of this.
- Lesson 3:** is a performance activity of a class arrangement which can be performed by members of the class on their own, or as a simple karaoke task with the recording.
- Lesson 4:** is a composition activity where students demonstrate their understanding of theme and variation by composing their own variations on an Australian folk song.

## Composer biography: Aaron Copland (1900–1990)

Aaron Copland was an American composer of the 20th century. He was born in Brooklyn in 1900 and died in New York in 1990, so his life almost spanned the entire 20th century.

Copland's musical influences were diverse and extended to idioms of jazz and American folk song. His compositional output includes works for orchestra, solo instruments, voice, film, theatre, opera, and ballet.

## Variations on a Shaker Melody (from Appalachian Spring)

The ballet *Appalachian Spring* was written by Copland in 1944. It tells the story of the life of a newlywed couple living in Pennsylvania during the 1800s on a pioneer settlement. It was originally scored for a 13-piece chamber ensemble but has since become popular as an orchestral work. The Shakers are a fundamentalist religious group, originally an offshoot from the Pilgrims. This excerpt is based on one such melody and thus it is like a hymn. This melody is now best known as the tune for the song *Lord of the Dance*.

*Variations on a Shaker Melody* is in theme and variation form, which means that after the tune or theme is first stated then followed by a series of five variations. In the variations the musical material is explored by the composer using techniques such as changing the instrumentation and the rhythm, adding additional layers of accompaniment and countermelody, and changing the character of the tune.

## Instrumentation

| Woodwind    | Brass       | Percussion   | Strings      |
|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| Flute       | 2 Horns     | Timpani      | Violins 1    |
| Piccolo     | 2 Trumpets  | Bass Drum    | Violins 2    |
| 2 Oboes     | 2 Trombones | Cymbals      | Violas       |
| 2 Clarinets |             | Side Drum    | Cellos       |
| 2 Bassoons  |             | Tambourine   | Double Bases |
|             |             | Triangle     |              |
|             |             | Glockenspiel |              |
|             |             | Piano        |              |

### Key musical concepts contained in this work

- 2 part structure (binary form) of the main theme; theme and variation form.
- Demonstrates how a composer can manipulate the elements of music to create variation.
- Models examples of rhythmic augmentation and diminution in the treatment of a melody.
- Showcases the tone colours of the orchestral instruments.

### At the conclusion of the activities students should be able to:

- perform the song *Lord of the Dance* and a classroom arrangement of an extract from Copland's piece.
- identify the two main themes and AB sections of the Shaker melody and orchestral timbres.
- recognise the contrasting use of the elements of music in each variation.
- identify and discuss the melodic and accompanying roles of the instruments in the piece.
- discuss the techniques of variation used by the composer and apply these to their own composition.

# Listening Guide

---

Variations on a Shaker Melody - Orchestral version:

<https://safeshare.tv/submit?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DaHTRNqfu20Q>

| Audio Cue | Features   |
|-----------|--|
| 0:00–0:28 | <b>Theme:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Shaker melody has two themes A and B (binary form).</li><li>• Theme A is played on solo clarinet. Theme B is shared between clarinet I and II.</li><li>• Accompaniment is provided by flute, harp, and piccolo.</li><li>• Short bridge (linking) passage featuring the woodwind leads into the first variation.</li></ul>  |
| 0:29–0:53 | <b>Variation 1:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Oboe and bassoon play the clarinet melody in a new key (G flat).</li><li>• Copland creates variation by changing the instruments playing the syncopated accompaniment figure used in this section, alternating between muted trumpets and horns.</li><li>• Bridge passage.</li></ul>   |
| 0:54–1:35 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Variation 2:</b></li><li>• In this variation the composer augments the rhythm, which means he uses longer notes by doubling the note values, giving the impression of the tune slowing down.</li><li>• Trombones and violas play the melody.</li><li>• An additional variation technique used is having the violins and horns play the melody in canon with the trombone and violas.</li><li>• Thicker texture. The tempo slightly increases into the next variation.</li></ul> |
| 1:36–1:58 | <b>Variation 3:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Marked vigorously and with accents, this variation is in the new key of C major.</li><li>• The first part of the tune is played by brass unaccompanied.</li><li>• The higher strings provide a running scale type accompaniment to Theme B. No bridge.</li></ul>   |
| 1:59–2:12 | <b>Variation 4:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This variation features the woodwind instruments, accompanied by the celli and double basses playing long sustained notes.</li><li>• Bassoon and oboe play the first part of the phrase while the clarinets play another part of the melody at the same time. Therefore the texture is polyphonic (two tunes playing simultaneously) and the variation is shorter as a result. Held note leads into final variation.</li></ul>                                 |
| 2:13–2:43 | <b>Variation 5:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This variation is played broadly as a majestic chorale.</li><li>• The note values are doubled (what was a crotchet is now a minim) which makes the theme grand and anthem like.</li><li>• It is played by the whole orchestra with strings and brass prominently playing the melody.</li></ul>   |

# Sequential Classroom Activities

## Lesson 1: Listening

1. Teach the song *The Lord of the Dance* to the students. A score is provided below:

Theme A

*I danced in the morn-ing when the world was be-gun and I danced with the moon and the stars and the sun I came down from hea-ven and I danced on the earth and in*

Theme B

*Beth le hem I had my birth. Dance then where ev - er you may be for I am the Lord of the dance said He, I'll lead you where ev - er you may be and I'll lead you all in the dance said He.*

The musical score is written on a single treble clef staff in 2/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Theme A consists of the first eight bars, and Theme B consists of the next eight bars. The lyrics are written below the notes.

2. Students sing *The Lord of the Dance* while seated and identify the entry of Theme B by standing up.
  - a) Once students are comfortable singing the song, add a foot stomp on the first beat of each bar in Theme A. Then students identify Theme B by displacing the foot stomp by one beat so that it occurs on beat 2.
  - b) Discuss the structure of the melody. How many sections are there? (*Two – Themes A and B*). How many bars are there in each section? Hint: Count the number of foot stomps. (*Eight bars in each section*).
3. Listen to the initial melody of *Variations on a Shaker Melody* (cue 0:00-0:29). Ask the students to create their own 4 beat ostinato accompaniment (repeated pattern) and write it in their books. Then swap books and have your neighbour read your pattern.
4. With a partner, devise a simple clapping pattern for Theme A and a different one for Theme B. Perform these patterns with the recording (cue 0:00-0:29).

5. Revise the four sections of the orchestra: strings, percussion, brass, and woodwind, and the instruments in each section. Refer to [page 10](#) for pictures and <https://www.mydso.com/dso-kids/learn-and-listen/instruments> for individual instrument sounds. Divide the class into 4 groups, each one representing one of the families of the orchestra. Listen to *Variations on a Shaker Melody* again. You will hear the main melody, then five variations.
  - a) As a class listen to the piece and identify the order in which the families in the orchestra (woodwind, brass, strings, percussion) play the theme.
  - b) Have each group stand and conduct to the beat when they hear their section playing the melody.
  - c) Have each group sit when their section is not playing the melody.
  - d) As the percussion section does not play the tune, the percussion group stand when prominent in the music.

| Theme    | Variation 1 | Variation 2 | Variation 3 | Variation 4 | Variation 5 |
|----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Woodwind | Woodwind    | Strings     | Brass       | Woodwind    | Everyone    |

6. Discuss the various instruments within each of the orchestral sections in regards to tone colour, shape, size etc. Print the instrument flashcards ([page 10](#)) and ask students to cut out the cards and play the following game:
  - a) Sort the cards into high and low sounding instruments.
  - b) Sort the cards into pitched and non-pitched instruments.
  - c) Sort the cards into blow, plucked and struck instruments.
  - d) Sort the cards into instrument families. (NB numerous variations and additional questions can be added, like wood/metal etc).
7. Ask each student to choose one of the instruments, then replay the piece and ask the students to:
  - a) Identify when their instrument is playing.
  - b) Consider whether their instrument played the melody or had an accompanying role within each section of the piece.
8. Divide the class into groups of no more than four or five.
  - a) Give each person a number (1-4 or 5). Sit in group circles.
  - b) Give one group contrasting percussion instruments e.g. woodblock, bells, xylophone, maracas, drum. Each student plays separately, keeping the beat or with a rhythm from the melody.
  - c) The other groups create movements reflective of the sound produced by the student within their number.
  - d) Students experiment with different combinations, from solo to quintet, listening for the sound of their corresponding instrument within the overall texture of their percussive sounds.
  - e) Observe the different audible and visual textures created. Discuss as a class.

## Lesson 2: Reading and performing

- One of the ways Copland creates variations in this theme is by changing the speed of the rhythm of the main theme.

1st playing (fast)

3rd playing (moderato)

6th playing (broadened/slow)

- Clap the rhythms and discuss the changes to the note values used.
- Ask students to explain how the rhythm of the melody changes in each of the six versions. They will hear that it seems to slow down as the note values double in each subsequent line.
- Listen to the recording again and clap the rhythms as they occur and change. Discuss the effects gained by these changes, in particular, the contrasting moods of each section.

- Revise the rhythm note value table below.

| Rhythm | Value  | Name                     | French Time Names<br>(for reciting rhythms) |
|--------|--|--------------------------|---|
|        | 1 beat rest  | crotchet rest            | saa   |
|        | 1 beat   | quavers                  | ta-te                                       |
|        | 1 beat   | crotchet                 | ta  |
|        | 1 beat   | semiquavers              | ta-fa-te-fe                                 |
|        | 1 beat   | quaver/semiquavers       | ta-tefe                                     |
|        | 1 beat   | dotted quaver semiquaver | ta-fa                                       |
|        | 2 beats (Play the first note and hold the second note) | crotchets                | ta-aa                                       |
|        | 2 beats  | minim                    | taa   |

Consider which note values are worth half as much as others and which are worth twice as much.

3. Choose a well-known nursery rhyme e.g. *The Grand Old Duke of York*. Apply the technique of rhythm augmentation (becomes broader) by using note values which are twice as long, and diminution (becomes faster) to the melody by using notes half the original value in length. See examples below:

Moderato (normal speed)

The grand old Duke of York He had ten thousand men

Broadened (slow)

The grand old Duke of York He had ten thousand men

Fast (double time)

The grand old Duke of York He had ten thousand men

- Sing through the examples using a different voice for each speed.
  - Combine the three layers together to create a polyphonic texture (melodies performed simultaneously). NB: The fast and moderato will have to be said through more than once.
4. Now sing Happy Birthday in the same way - normal, halving the note values to broaden the music and then performing it twice the original tempo (speed) which halves the original note values.
- How do the different tempos affect the mood and style of each repetition?

### Lesson 3: Performing

1. Learn the rhythm and notes of the arrangement below. Allocate parts according to student ability. Once these are known, experiment with dynamics and expression to give your performance more musical contrast and interest.

Theme A

Voices/Melody

Descant Recorder

Percussion

Percussion

D. Rec.

Perc.

Perc.

Theme B

D. Rec.

Perc.

Perc.

D. Rec.

Perc.

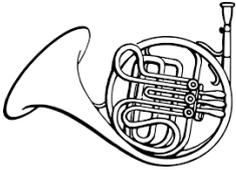
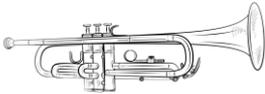
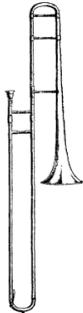
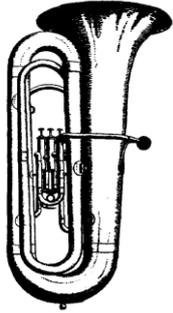
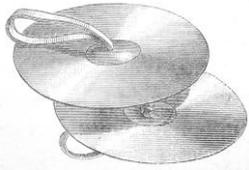
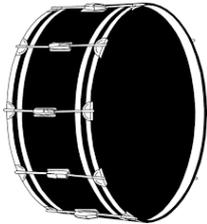
Perc.

## Lesson 4: Composing

1. A pioneer is someone who explores new territory. Research the lives of some of the pioneers in Australia. You may find artworks from the Heidelberg school useful in depicting what the lifestyle was like at this time for the early settlers in Australia.
2. Make a list of some of the colonial and folk songs that people used to sing which tell stories about people and places from the early days of pioneer Australia. If you have students from a range of ethnic backgrounds be sure to have them share their music with the class too.

Some possible inclusions may be:

- The Wild Colonial Boy <http://folkstream.com/097.html>
  - Lime Juice Tub <http://folkstream.com/055.html>
  - Waltzing Matilda <http://folkstream.com/094.html>
  - Some indigenous chants and traditional songs and dances
3. Choose a short play or bush poem which relates to the story of an Australian character. The internet can provide many of these. Examples to include as a starting point:
    - Mary Hannay-Foott: *Where the Pelican Builds Her Nest*
    - Thomas Sencer: *How McDougall Topped the Score*
    - Banjo Patterson: *The Man From Ironbark*
    - Jack Drake: *The Cattle Dog's Revenge* (a modern bush poem)
    - An indigenous work from the collection: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/aus/alt/index.htm>
  4. Task: Creating a radio program
    - a) In a group of 4-5 create your own folk tune using the notes of the C pentatonic scale or the C major scale. Then write words, keeping in mind the story or poem you have chosen.
    - b) Experiment with ways of varying it using some of Copland's ideas in *Appalachian Spring*. Record your ideas using either a graphic or traditional score so the whole group can remember and perform them.
    - c) Use available technology (keyboards, midi sounds, mobile phones or any other source) to select a number of appropriate sound effects that can be used to "punctuate" your story.
    - d) Once you have a series of variations and the collection of atmospheric sounds, use these as the incidental music (background or scene change music) as one member of the group reads aloud the story/poem you have selected. Remember to insert music in between sections of the text. Create a graphic score containing all the information you need to perform your work as a group for the class.
    - e) Rehearse your music and then record your play and upload it to your class network so others can listen to it.

|  |  |   |  |
|--|--|---|--|
| <p>VIOLIN</p>       | <p>VIOLA</p>      | <p>CELLO</p>        | <p>DOUBLE BASS</p>  |
| <p>FRENCH HORN</p>  | <p>TRUMPET</p>    | <p>TROMBONE</p>     | <p>TUBA</p>        |
| <p>PICCOLO</p>    | <p>FLUTE</p>    | <p>OBOE</p>        | <p>CLARINET</p>   |
| <p>BASSOON</p>    | <p>CYMBALS</p>  | <p>BASS DRUM</p>  | <p>TIMPANI</p>    |

Images: Lena London (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), and public domain