



FEATURE

Offbeat Notation

Meets National Core Arts Anchor Standards 2, 5, 7, 9, and 11

OBJECTIVES

- Organize and develop artistic ideas and work (*Cr2*)
- Develop and refine work for artistic presentation (*Pr5*)
- Perceive and analyze artistic work (*Re7*)
- Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work (*Re9*)
- Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding (*Cn11*)

MATERIALS

- *Music Alive!* magazines (February 2017)
- Computer or mobile device with Internet access
- Blank paper
- Classroom instruments

START

1. Ask your students to read “Offbeat Notation” on pages 10-13, then go over the words below. [This reinforces comprehension and vocabulary.]

STIFLED—held back

ERRONEOUS—having errors

STREAMLINED—ran smoothly

EMBELLISHING—decorating

PARLANCE—a way of speaking

ABSTRACT—hard to define

DEVELOP

- ▶ 1. Play Morton Feldman’s *Projection 1* (Hear the Music track 5 on [musicalive.com](#)).

ASK

- **What’s the instrumentation?** (Just cello.)
- **What’s the first technique that you hear?** (*Pizzicato*—the strings are plucked.)
- **Is the cello played *arco*—with the bow—as well?** (Yes.)
- **Does the music seem to have a traditional key signature and time signature?** (No.)
- **Do you hear any repeating motifs?** (Yes, for example, the pizzicato motif of a major ninth.)
- **Based on your reading, can you name the piece and composer?** (*Projection 1* by Morton Feldman.)
- **How would you describe the score? Does it look like standard notation?** (Subjective.)
- **In what decade was it written?** (1950s. It was composed in 1950.)
- **What do you think of this music?** (Subjective.)

- ▶ 2. Play John Cage’s *Fontana Mix* (Hear the Music track 6 on [musicalive.com](#)).

ASK

- **What instruments do you hear?** (None. Magnetic tapes were used to create the sound.)
- **Does this piece have a steady rhythm?** (No.)

- **Does the music have any repeated themes?** (No.)
- **Based on your reading, can you identify the piece and the composer?** (*Fontana Mix* by John Cage.)
- **In what decade was it written?** (1950s. It was composed in 1958.)
- **What’s unique about the score?** (It’s written on sheets of transparent film.)
- **Is the piece meant to be performed in one way, or interpreted by the performer?** (Interpreted.)
- **What do you think of the piece?** (Subjective.)

- ▶ 3. Play George Crumb’s *Makrokosmos, Volume 1, Part Three - Dream Images (Love-death Music)* (Hear the Music track 7 on [musicalive.com](#)).

ASK

- **What’s the instrumentation?** (Solo piano.)
- **Does the music sound tonal (in harmony) or atonal (dissonant and random)?** (Yes and no—there are both tonal and atonal elements. Some of the tonal parts come from a quotation of Frédéric Chopin’s *Fantaisie-Improptu, Op.66*.)
- **Based on your reading, can you name the suite of pieces and the composer that this selection comes from?** (*Makrokosmos* by George Crumb.)
- **Do you think the score is entirely graphic?** (No. It combines standard notation and graphic elements.)
- **In what decade was it written?** (1970s. It was composed in 1972.)
- **What do you think of this selection?** (Subjective.)
- **Which of these three compositions do you prefer—and why?** (Also subjective.)

CLOSE

Hand out sheets of blank paper to the students.

Then ask them to compose their own graphic scores, inspired by some of the ideas they read about in the article. The scores can be completely abstract, or they can contain some elements of traditional notation. They can be written for keyboards, any other available classroom instruments, or any kind of sound source—it’s up to the students’ imaginations. Then, have them play their creations in front of the class and pass around the scores so that all the students can see them.

ASSESS

- **Did the students read the article about graphic notation?**
- **Did they talk about the listening selections?**
- **How did they respond to hearing this music?**
- **Did they experiment with graphic notation?**
- **Did they perform their pieces?**