In Tune Activity Plans – Volume 18, Issue 4

**Cover Story: *Kelsea Ballerini – Songwriter/Singer***

National Standards: 7-8, 11

As a child, Kelsea Ballerini’s first musical forays were in songwriting. She eventually discovered and developed her singing but learning to play an instrument and composing music came first. The same is true today and prioritization has created a foundation for a “next level” career.

She’s also musically curious and a student of multiple genres. Given her upbringing in Knoxville, Tennessee, and due to the music she heard at home and in public, her first leanings were toward country music. However, as she matured and explored, she became partial to pop artists – particularly Taylor Swift, who also views herself as a songwriter first – and emulated both Swift’s pop and country blending, as well as her career path.

**Prepare**

Have students listen to the latest music by both Taylor Swift and Kelsea Ballerini. Point out that Taylor Swift is no longer including the signature sounds of country in her music, but that Kelsea Ballerini is. Do students think that will change for Ballerini, and why?

Key points in the article:

• Ballerini first saw songwriting as a way of processing her emotional issues

• Collaboration with other songwriters has become – and for many writers of the past has always been – a key part of music creation. This because writing lyrics and music are discreet activities, and not every writer can do both. Ballerini can but collaborates freely and often.

• Duality and stuck-between-ness have long been recurring themes in Ballerini’s music, and in her career itself — she’s not a cowgirl, but not yet a pop star, and writes about “not fitting in.”

• Ballerini has been criticized by country music purists for incorporating pop styles into her country music.

**Begin**

Review vocabulary words from the article:

• NAVIGATE: plan and direct the route, course or path.

• PUBLISHING: preparing and issuing books, journals, music and other material for sale.

• INTROSPECTIVE: to examine one's own thoughts and feelings.

• UNAPOLOGETICALLY: in a manner that does not acknowledge or express regret

• IDIOSYNCRATIC: an individual characteristic or quality; a unique oddity

**Discuss**

Compare and contrast the career benefits and drawbacks of creating in multiple ways, and even multiple media.

Benefits could be:

• Satisfaction in exploring one’s diverse skills and interests.

Drawbacks could be:

• Lack of focus, or a diffusion of effort, i.e., “jack of all trades-master of none.”

Play music and/or videos of Ballerini’s collaborations (checking in advance for appropriate lyrics and video content), with Kenny Chesney, and separately, Halsey.

Ask

• Which part of element of the song might have come from Kelsea, and why do you think so?

• Is there any pop in the Kenny Chesney collaboration(s), or any country in the Halsey song?

• Name some contemporary artists who have blended genres in their music and provide examples

**Expand**

Discuss the role of criticism in the media, including social media.

• How should artists react to the reviews of their work?

• Should the opinions of fans and critics influence an artist’s creative output. What is the upside and downside of doing so?

Questions

1. Why is Kelsea missing live performance due to the pandemic?

2. What is the name of Kelsea’s third album?

3. What is the name of her fourth album, and how does it relate to *Kelsea*

4. What was it that made Kelsea become a songwriter?

5. How did she first approach the process of music creation?

6. What was Kelsea’s first professional activity in the music business?

7. Where did Kelsea grow up?

8. Other than pop and country, what other genre does Kelsea’s writing draw from?

9. What frequent theme does Kelsea write about?

10. Though most often compared to Swift, what album has *Kelsea* been compared to?

Answers

1. She misses spending time with her band and crew.

2. *Kelsea.*

3. *Ballerini.* It’s a “stripped down” version of *Kelsea,* with versions of that album’s songs.

4. She loved the feeling of creating something that moved someone else.

5. She used songwriting as a way to express her emotions when her parents were divorcing

6. She signed a publishing deal as a songwriter when she was 19

7. East Tennessee on a farm. “My roots are extremely southern.”

8. Jazz

9. Duality and stuck-between-ness.

10. Ariana Grande’s 2019 “Thank U, Next

Feature Story: To Zoom and Beyond

National Standards: 1, 8-10

Teleconferencing, or “video conferencing” was primarily a tool used by businesspeople to make presentations to others over the internet, or to “meet” while separated by long distances. The pandemic changed all of that. Concurrently, Zoom and other live streaming platforms had become easier to use.

Friends and families began using live streaming more actively to communicate and share experiences as a way of filling the void created by social distancing and quarantining. Musical artists who weren’t able to perform live also increased their use of live streaming.

**Prepare**

Discuss the opportunity that musicians have to live stream their performances:

Key points in the article:

• Live streaming is somewhat more complicated than it seems because the platforms weren’t created to transmit diverse musical sounds, instead supplying default audio settings that focus on one sound source.

• Music and video require greater bandwidth, and some WiFi and computer systems aren’t robust enough to carry these signals. The result can be glitching or freezing.

• Lighting and background imagery can play a role in offering a superior performance.

**Begin**

Poll your students to see who has performed live online before.

• Ask them about their experience. Did it go well? Any issues?

• Ask students if they planned to participate or create performance webcasts. What platform will they use?

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

• LATENCY – the lag in time for signals to go from one computer to another

• BANDWIDTH: the capacity of computer, connector, transmitter or receiver

• SUPRESSION: the imposing of limits

• DISRUPTIVE: an action that changes a course or path

• AVATAR: an animation that copies the characteristics of a live being

**Discuss**

Webcasted live musical performances can reach those who can’t attend a live show, and though musicians can’t get feedback from attendees, they can thereby reach more people in more places.

**Expand**

The vagaries of live streaming musical performance today are mostly about the limits of technology. The future of webcasting will remove some of those limits and create the opportunity to make shows more interactive. Discuss the possibilities for interactivity and search during webcasts, and the opportunity for individuals to create webcasted performances with TV-like production quality.

Feature Story: Chord Inversions

National Standards: 1, 7-9, 10

The technique whereby different chord “voicings” are created by using notes from different octaves, or inversions, is useful in that doing so allows a chord progression to more easily carry a melody. This then introduces the concept of arranging music.

**Prepare**

Play each of the audio tracks included in the In Tune story on chord inversions and listen to how the chords stay the same but sound different.

Inspire a discussion about voicings are important to songs, and how they change fingering.

Key points in the article:

• Notation for some forms of music including jazz and rock only provide chord names, leaving the inversion to the player.

• Choosing certain voicings can help players stay within the sonic range of their instruments.

• Choosing certain chord inversions can help musicians play melodies more easily.

**Begin**

Choose one of the story’s chord inversion examples.

• Ask students why a writer or player would choose one voicing over another.

• Ask your students how choosing certain voicings can help musicians

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

• POLYPHONIC– the ability of an instrument to play multiple sounds at the same time.

• PROGRESSION: in music, a series of notes or chords written or played within a formula.

• INTERPRETING: translating the meaning of words or expressing a same or similar sound in a different way.

• ARPEGGIATE: play a chord as a series of ascending or descending notes.

• TRIAD: in three parts; in music, a chord with three notes.

**Discuss**

Play a familiar song on a piano or guitar using its written or performed inversions. Then change the inversions and ask students how they change the song, and why the originals were chosen.

Q&A

1. What is the purpose of a chord inversions?

2. How can a monophonic instrument play a chord?

3. Doesn’t sheet music dictate chord voicings?

4. What is a three-note chord called?

5. Other than to better carry a melody, why would a symphonic composer invert a chord?

6. What is a chord’s root?

Answers

1. To make playing the melody easier and more natural.

2. By arpeggiating the chord, or playing its notes in succession, one at a time

3. Yes, but jazz and some pop/rock notation only offers symbols and/or chord names leaving the voicings up to the player.

4. A triad.

5. To keep it within the range of a particular instrument, or section of instruments.

6. The lowest note in a chord is its root. For example, an F major triad in root position will have an F as its lowest note.

Feature Story: How to Play The Strokes’ “Last Nite”

National Standards: 1-9

NYC-based band The Strokes were active from 1998 through 2006 and singer Julian Casablancas wrote “Last Nite,” a break-up song featuring slightly distorted guitars and vocals, and a driving rock beat.

The song is uncomplicated in its construction and even novice players should be able to pull it off. Key to the song is replicating the sound of the guitars, but also a drummer paying attention to the playing – and not playing - of a crash cymbal. A short and simple guitar solo rounds out the tune.

Prepare

Have students listen to the Strokes’ recording and identify each of the instruments and parts. Listen for the different guitars, how flat sounding (rather than boomy) the bass part is, and also how the use of cymbals dials the song’s energy up and down.

Key points in the article:

• Guitar distortion effects can be found and applied via amplifier or pedal settings.

• Vocal distortion is accomplished by the singer limiting his distance from the mic, sometimes “overloading” it to produce the effect.

• A splashy crash cymbal sound increases in intensity at times.

• The singer attaches a measure of attitude or “swagger” to phrases, accentuating his disdain for his relationship.

**Begin**

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

• DISTORTION – Alteration of an audio or video signal caused by change in the wave form of the original signal.

• NONSENSICAL: language, conduct, or an idea that is absurd or contrary to good sense

• PANACHE: dash or exaggeration in style and action.

• PEDALBOARD: a flat frame placed on the floor, with mounted and connected guitar effects boxes, each of which is trigger by a foot switch.

• UNADORNED: plain and without frills

**Discuss**

How important is it to play rock music at high volume, and what are the issues with doing so?

• What role does mixing or balance play in the music of a small ensemble?

• What are the options for sound reinforcement or amplification in terms of mic’ing and monitoring?

Select a sampling of distortion sounds on manufacturer websites and play the sound of a tremelo effect, a chorus effect, a flanger effect and three types of distortion effects.

Play the song and listen for how the crash cymbal starts, builds, stops and re-enters.

Ask

• Each student to find and recommend a song that features a guitar played through a distortion box.

• Play Jimi Hendrix version of the national anthem.

Expand

How important were electronic effects to the development of the rock music of the ‘50s and early 60’s to the versions of rock played by bands like Led Zeppelin, The Who, Santana and what changes in rock and rock culture occurred as the music changed?