

Charlie Puth

National Standards: Pr4, Re 7-9, Cn11

Charlie Puth is a rare breed of pop star. Traditionally, artists and songwriters think in terms of emotional impact, taking a bird’s-eye-view of a song and leaving the technical, nitty-gritty details of a recording to a producer. Puth is both of these elements rolled into one, an entirely self-sufficient artist equally adept at performance, songwriting, and production. Often building his vintage-inspired, laser-precise digital productions from the ground up entirely on his own, Puth has blazed a trail to pop stardom using his prodigious talents and meticulous attention to detail. His latest record, *Whatever’s Clever!*, is the culmination of two decades of pop perfectionism. Share his story with your class today!

Prepare

By a show of hands, ask the class how many are familiar with Charlie Puth or his music. Besides being a staple of the pop charts since the mid-2010s as a soloist and with an impressive array of A-List collaborations, Puth was also a trailblazer of social media fan engagement creating plenty of potential avenues of exposure. Ask the class which of his songs they are familiar with. How would they describe his sound? Are they familiar with his proficiency as a producer, or do they only know him as a singer and songwriter?

Next, read the article as a class.

Key points in the article:

- Puth’s mother, a music teacher, recognized his talent in early childhood. He began studying classical piano by age four and experimenting with recording software by middle school. His perfect pitch and clever harmonic ideas made him a breakout social media star as a teenager, and he went on to study music production at Berklee.
- By the time he graduated from the Berklee College of Music in Boston, Puth had signed a contract with Atlantic Records. After singing and co-writing the hit single “See You Again” for the *Furious 7* movie soundtrack, demand for his debut album went through the roof. *Nine Track Mind* followed shortly after, producing multiple hits and showcasing his talent for both songwriting and production.
- Despite the success of his debut, Puth later admitted he felt rushed to finish it and didn’t think it represented his artistic identity. He remedied that with his next two releases, 2018’s *Voicenotes* and 2022’s *Charlie*. Both albums demonstrated a cohesive, polished aesthetic that was 100% Puth. His latest release, *Whatever’s Clever!*, stands as his strongest artistic statement yet.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Meticulous:** showing great attention to detail; very careful and precise
- **Maximalist:** an aesthetic characterized by excess and abundance, serving as a reaction against minimalism
- **Cynical:** believing that people are motivated purely by self-interest; distrustful of human sincerity or integrity
- **Cohesion:** The state of being united or working well together
- **Microscopic:** so small as to be visible only with a microscope

Discuss

After reading the article, play Puth's latest single "Changes" for the class and ask them to listen actively. How would they describe the sound? What lyrical themes do they notice? What instruments do they hear?

Next, play excerpts of notable songs from previous Puth records, like "Attention" or "Left and Right." How do they compare stylistically to his newer output? Is the production similar, or has there been a stylistic shift? Do the lyrical themes of "Changes" align with his previous singles, or is there a new focus?

Q&A

1. When did Puth start sharing TikTok videos transforming everyday noises into song ideas?
2. Which track from Puth's debut album *Nine Track Mind* featured Selena Gomez?
3. Beyond his own catalogue, which notable acts has Puth produced and written songs for?
4. Where was Puth born?
5. Rather than starting with lyrics, Puth often begins his songwriting process with _____ or _____.

Answers

1. Early 2020s
2. "We Don't Talk Anymore"
3. Katy Perry, Liam Payne, and 5 Seconds of Summer
4. Rumson, New Jersey
5. Texture; rhythm

Expand

One of the defining elements of Puth's success is his meticulous self-production. Though it is uncommon for pop stars to be equally talented in the vocal booth, the writing room, and behind the mixing console, there have been other notable musical artists who famously produced themselves.

For a writing assignment, have students identify another self-producing artist and research their career. In a short report, students should summarize the career of their selected artist and compare it to Puth's. Did they rocket to fame at an early age, or did they build to it gradually? Was their music popular and well-received by critics, or did they struggle for acceptance? How does (did) the artist approach writing, recording, and production? Do they rely on the same technology or recording equipment as Puth? Does their selected artist mirror Puth's digital perfectionism, or do they rely on a looser, more analog approach? How does that affect their sound?

How To Play "Every Breath You Take" by The Police

National Standards: 1-9

There are many factors that determine a great song to cover; a memorable guitar riff, melodies that crowds can sing along with, and a distinct mood or atmosphere are all great starting points. And if the form and dynamics of the song can be educational, too? All the better. The Police's 1983 anthem "Every Breath You Take" encompasses all of these elements. Their use of AABA song form, a hypnotically simple arrangement, and cathartic crescendos at key moments make the tune an unforgettable classic. Add it to your ensemble's repertoire today!

Prepare

To start, ask the class if they have heard "Every Breath You Take." Since its release in 1983, it has remained virtually inescapable. Even if students don't recognize it by name, they will likely know it as soon as they hear it.

Play the song in its entirety and have the class take notes. How would they describe the style/genre of the song? What instruments do they hear? How would they describe the dynamics? What are some key moments in the song? Do they notice anything unique or unusual about the sound or structure? After discussing, read the article as a class.

Key points in the article:

- By the time they released *Synchronicity* in 1983, The Police were a global phenomenon. Known for their daring blend of rock, punk, pop, and reggae, there was truly no other band on the planet that sounded like them. "Every Breath You Take" presented a more restrained, introspective version of the band, although no less innovative.
- In modern pop music, verse-chorus form is essentially ubiquitous. "Every Breath You Take" eschews that formula and opts for AABA form, used frequently in jazz standards and showtunes. While the difference is subtle, it plays a key part in the song's unique impact.
- A key element of "Every Breath You Take" is the simplicity of the arrangement. Each instrument's part is repetitive and leaves plenty of space in the mix – resist the temptation to fill that space! That openness in the sound is what produces the hypnotic effect. As a bonus, it leaves plenty of dynamic room to grow, which makes the bridge hit especially hard.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Infectious:** likely to spread or influence others in a rapid manner
- **Signature:** something that serves to set apart or identify
- **Sparse:** of few and scattered elements
- **Ad lib:** spoken or performed without previous preparation
- **Hypnotic:** having an effect like hypnosis

Discuss

After reading the article, conduct a classroom discussion comparing their notes about “Every Breath You Take” with the article’s analysis. Did their observations match the author’s assessments of the song? Did the author point out any important elements that students missed on their initial listen? If so, play the song once more and see if the class can catch it on second listen.

Next, conduct a class brainstorm about how to adapt “Every Breath You Take” to their lineup of instruments. If the ensemble includes drums, bass, electric guitar, keys, and at least one vocalist, they can adapt a note-for-note recreation of the record. If the instrumental lineup looks a bit different (or includes more instruments than the record), not to worry! The simplicity of each instrument’s part makes them easily transferable between instruments. The most important thing to keep in mind is *space*. Let every instrument have its room to breathe. Overplaying and crowding the mix will immediately lose the power of the song. Start sparse and leave room to build dynamically in the bigger sections!

Q&A

1. What is the name for one full AABA repetition?
2. Which two keys is “Every Breath You Take” in between?
3. In which city was The Police formed?
4. How did The Police pitch the song down between keys, and why?
5. Why was The Police’s sound more sparse than many of their pop-rock contemporaries?

Answers

1. A chorus
2. A and Ab
3. London
4. It might have been recorded in A and slowed down a quarter-tone to make it sound moodier
5. They were a trio with no keyboards

Expand

Before the next meeting of the ensemble, have students learn their individual parts as decided in the earlier brainstorm session. At the beginning of the first rehearsal, listen to “Every Breath You Take” as a class one more time before attempting to play it. Discuss the form and arrangement of the song and any changes agreed upon in the brainstorm session.

Next, set up instruments and play the song. Stop after each playthrough of the song to discuss any changes that need to be made and clear up any questions the class may have. Once the ensemble is comfortable with the song and has successfully played it multiple times, record one final play-through (a phone camera recording will do just fine).

After rehearsal, make the video accessible to students and have them watch it before the next meeting. Start the next rehearsal by watching the video together and having a class discussion. How does the song feel overall? Is the arrangement effective? Does the band nail the tempo and dynamics of the song? Does it feel like anything is missing? If so, discuss how to adapt. Repeat this process for as many rehearsals as it takes to nail the tune!

Songs in The Big KeySpace

National Standards: 1-9

Musicians often think of keys as mutually exclusive – if you’re playing in one, you can’t be playing in any others. Sure, you can modulate to a different key, but it’s still one tonal center at a time. Some songs, however, exist in a space between keys, never fully touching down in any one area. This creates ambiguity, intrigue, and the occasional raised eyebrow. While some achieve this feat subconsciously, there are a few strategies musicians can follow to escape the tyranny of single-key governance. Teach your class how to occupy The Big KeySpace today!

Prepare

To prepare for the article, review necessary concepts such as key signatures and modulations. Assuming students know how to stick to one key at a time, they will have all the foundation they need to follow along. Conduct a brief classroom discussion, starting by asking if the class has ever heard a song in multiple keys. How does it affect the mood or atmosphere of a song when the key changes? Is it possible for a song to be in multiple keys at once?

After discussing, read the article as a class.

Key points in the article:

- For musicians and listeners steeped in the traditions of Western harmony, it is taken for granted that most songs are in a single key. The only exception to that rule in popular music is when a song modulates to a new key – or so we often think. However, there are many songs that live subtly in between keys, never fully landing in one or the other. We’re calling this “the Big KeySpace.”
- Some forms of music, like jazz or particularly the blues, naturally step outside the notes of a key signature. These “blue notes” give the genre its distinctive sound. In musical styles that tend to play nicely in one key, like pop, there are still ways to step into the Big KeySpace. One of the ways is to create melodies that flirt between relative major/minor keys or parallel major/minor keys.
- In more extreme examples, songs might live in the Big KeySpace because their chord progressions never fully resolve into one key. Songs like “Spirit Ditties of No Tone” by Deerhoof take sharp turns every time it feels like the progression is about to hit

a point of resolution. This produces an ambiguous tension that can powerfully underscore the lyrical message.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Modulate:** the process of changing from one key (tonal center) to another within a composition, often used to create emotional contrast, increase energy, or provide a fresh feel
- **Subtle:** not loud, bright, noticeable, or obvious in any way
- **Whimsical:** playfully quaint or fanciful, especially in an appealing and amusing way
- **Ambiguous:** unclear or inexact because a choice between alternatives has not been made
- **Subjective:** based on or influenced by personal feelings, tastes, or opinions

Discuss

While reading the article together, stop at each example and allow students to work through it individually or in small groups. Allow volunteers to demonstrate the example for the class. After each demonstration, ask the class for their reactions. Do they like the sound of the example? What feeling does the harmonic ambiguity create? Do they understand the technique that produced that ambiguity?

After working through the full article, conduct a summary discussion. Which example did the class find the most inspiring? Did they struggle to understand any of the examples? After working through the article, do they feel prepared to recognize songs that don't live comfortably in one key? Even compose their own music in the Big KeySpace?

Q&A

- What did bebop musicians mix with the major scale to write blues melodies in the Big KeySpace?
- What are the two ways to be in major and minor at the same time?

- According to the article, writing a song in a key is a little bit like building a _____?
- Which genre naturally pushes outside the boundaries of Western Harmony?
- Which Deerhoof song features chord progressions that simply stop their common harmonic paths to drop listeners into the Big KeySpace?

Answers

- Blue notes and other accidentals
- Using relative major/minor and parallel major/minor
- Sandcastle
- Blues
- “Spirit Ditties of No Tone”

Expand

Create a Big KeySpace composition assignment tailored to the level of your class.

For students with less composition experience: create an 8-bar melody with simple accompaniment. Ask students to use one of the techniques in the article to change the notes of the melody to help it occupy multiple keys at once. They might use the parallel major/minor technique from example 1 or the Bebop blue note/accidentals strategy from example 2.

For compositionally proficient students: working alone or in small groups, have students create their own 8-bar composition in the Big KeySpace. They can choose to focus on the melodic strategies of ex. 1-2, or they can attempt their own Deerhoof-style composition with chord changes that subvert expectations.

For a bonus activity, have students perform their compositions for the class on their due date. Ask students to play their example and then talk the class through their compositional strategy. Which techniques from the article did they use? Was it difficult to think outside of a single key? Do they feel their composition effectively reached the Big KeySpace?

From Grentperez to Chuck Berry

National Standards: 10-11

For young artists, musicians, and songwriters, there is perhaps no exercise more beneficial than analyzing their favorite artist's influences (and their influences' influences, and so on...). Not only will they discover new music, but they will make connections between a variety of genres and time periods, gaining an invaluable sense of perspective. Starting with rising Sydney-based bedroom pop artist Grentperez, we will trace a line of influences all the way back to rock n' roll pioneer Chuck Berry. Share the journey with your class today!

Prepare

To start, ask the class if they are familiar with the music of Grentperez. If not, play them an excerpt of his breakout hit "Cherry Wine." Ask them to describe the style, sound, and atmosphere of the music.

Next, ask the class who they consider their biggest influences (or simply their favorite artists). As students offer their answers, ask if they have ever researched the influences of that artist. Why might that be a beneficial exercise?

After discussing, read the article as a class.

Key points in the article:

- Starting as a teenage YouTube cover artist, Grentperez cultivated a devoted following online. His profile grew massively when the single "Cherry Wine" went viral, introducing his nostalgic soft rock/bedroom pop style to the world. His sound was largely influenced by Bread, a popular 1970s soft rock band.
- Bread's lead singer, David Gates, prioritized a stripped-back approach that showcased lyrics and storytelling. This stylistic choice was heavily influenced by the Beatles' varied and experimental storytelling.
- The Beatles' early output was full of fun, energetic, innovative takes on rock n' roll. They frequently credited Chuck Berry as a key inspiration for this period of their development. Berry's unforgettable guitar lines, sense of humor, and knack for crafting a lyrical narrative made him a leading light of the rock n' roll revolution.

Begin

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Cultivate:** to foster the growth of (something)
- **Nostalgic:** feeling or inspiring nostalgia: such as a longing for or thinking fondly of a past time or condition
- **Approachable:** accessible; not off-putting or intimidating
- **Knack:** an acquired or natural skill at performing a task
- **Template:** a form or pattern used as a guide to create something consistently and efficiently

Discuss

After reading the article, ask the class if they have listened to any of the influences downstream from Greent Perez. Would they have expected to see these artists listed so closely together?

Play an excerpt of one of the Bread songs listed in the article and ask students to describe its sound and lyrical approach. Can they spot the influence in Greent Perez's music? How is it similar, and how is it different? Repeat this exercise for every artist listed in the article, listening to a selected song and tracing their influence in the music of the previous artist on the list.

Q&A

1. Which song provided Greent Perez's breakout moment?
2. Which artist's playfulness and guitar style made a huge impact on The Beatles?
3. Which soft rock icons taught Greent Perez the value of melody and emotional simplicity?
4. Which artist from the article is described as one of the most transformative bands in modern music history?
5. What are two of Bread's most important songs?

Answers

1. "Cherry Wine"
2. Chuck Berry
3. Bread
4. The Beatles
5. "It Don't Matter To Me" and "If"

Expand

For an extra assignment, have students create their own *Influences* article. Have them select a modern artist they enjoy and write a short description of their style, most significant songs, and career trajectory. Then, list one of their biggest influences and describe the connection. This should be repeated until the article includes four artists.

As a bonus, ask students to include their reactions to their own trail of influences. Would they ever have expected to trace a line from their favorite modern artist to the fourth artist? Did it give them a sense of appreciation for any new styles of music?