

History & Development of the Patter Song

LESSON PLAN

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to identify how writers utilize change in tempo to demonstrate a character's emotions, create contrast, or show heightened thought.

DEFINITIONS

Patter Song: a fast song with many words, usually funny but difficult to sing

Tempo: speed at which a piece of music is meant to be played and sung

INTRODUCTION

At 11 minutes into the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis' production of *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879) by the renowned team of Arthur Sullivan and W.S. Gilbert, we arrive at the iconic song "Major General's Song." One of the **FIRST** things to notice or draw attention to is the speed and dexterity of the performer.

FIRST ACTIVITY

On mute (or encourage students to cover their ears so they can focus on their own speech), ask students to see how quickly they can say the first verse of the song.

I am the very model of a modern Major General
I've information vegetable, animal, and mineral,
I know the kings of England, and I quote the fights historical
From Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical;

- What words were the hardest to say quickly?
- Do you think that people would be able to understand every word being said the faster you go?

Allow the students an opportunity to show off how quickly they can try and make it through the verse.

CONVERSATION QUESTIONS

- When are times when you speak faster or slower?
- When are times when you might speak louder or softer?
- Why do you think your speed changes in these times?
- Does who you are around and what you want them to think of you change your speed?

Oftentimes in operetta and musicals, the change in speed is on purpose to reflect a change in the character's perspective, emotions, or comfortability. In "Major General's Song" we see this older authority figure come in after the wildness of the Pirate King, and he wants to assert his power, authority, and brilliance. After watching the whole show, do we think that the Major General actually has the most power, authority, and brilliance?

TRANSITION

The "Major General Patter Song" (possibly inspired by Gioachino Rossini's character Dr. Bartolo in *The Barber of Seville* - 1813) is considered one of the most iconic found in operettas which bridged the gap between Opera and the contemporary American musical. Patter Song often is used to demonstrate the character's desire to show other characters their brilliance and smarts. This example can be seen in the character of Harold Hill in the 1957 musical *The Music Man* by Meredith Wilson. In order to trick the townspeople into accepting his business scheme he sings the song "Ya Got Trouble." Notice how his logic is flawed but by the speed of the song it makes it hard to follow.

[PEOPLE]
Oh, we got trouble

[HAROLD]
Right here in River City!

[PEOPLE]
Right here in River City!

[HAROLD]
With a capital "T"
And that rhymes with "P"
And that stands for pool!

Similarly, this same attempt to use Patter to obfuscate the lack of reasoning can be seen in the 1975 musical *Chicago* by writing team Kander and Ebb. Lawyer Billy Flynn and his client, who is suspected of murdering Roxie Hart, sing the song "We Both Reached for the Gun." Again, we see Flynn as a showman trying to persuade an audience. Has there ever been a situation in your life where you felt things were moving too fast for you to understand? Can you give an example?

TRANSITION CONT'D

We also can see that sometimes the Patter Song is used to combine both verbal and physical dexterity to create spectacle! In the 2004 version of *Mary Poppins* by Richard and Robert Simmons this comes together in the already-impressively-named "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!"

Country singing artist Hank Snow, in his cover of the Geoff Mack song "I've Been Everywhere," shows another use of Patter when he uses it to condense a long list of items into a short timeframe. The speed of this list contrasted with the pace of his travels creates a contrast that shows skill and a playfulness that made the song a hit. Can you hear and understand everywhere he has been, man? Can you think of examples of other times when a contrast of tempo was helpful?

Patter isn't always about speed sometimes it is about setting a pace or playful rhythm. This is where we get the idea of "Patter" in that is a short quick "Pattern." In comedian Pigmeat Markham's iconic 1968 recording "Here Comes the Judge," the patter is designed to set up a rhythm that allows for the other person to set up and finish a joke. This song and its rhythm were used for years as a way to "zing" one liners in a reliable rhythm. Do you have a joke that could fit into this type of patter? This recording is often credited with igniting the American art form of rap.

The most overreaching use of the Patter Song across genres is the change of speed and pace to suggest heightened emotions. In the American musical genre, a great example is "Not Getting Married Today" from *Company* by Stephen Sondheim and George Furth (1970). The patter here is specifically designed to reflect the racing heart of Amy on this day. Note too that even though her emotions are high and intense her physical self is still and subdued. This is a type of performance for others. Instead of the Patter Song reflecting a performance of arrogance or authority, it is a performance to make others think she is calm when she is clearly not. Have you ever felt like your heart was racing at a million lyrics a minute, but you had to remain cool and calm on the outside?

In Lin Manuel Miranda's groundbreaking musical *Hamilton* (2015), we have two particular references to the Patter Song that are of importance. When Marquis de Lafayette is trying to show off in the Second Act, he flies through the lyrics in "Guns and Ships."

I'm takin' this horse by the reins makin'
Redcoats redder with bloodstains
Lafayette!
And I'm never gonna stop until I make 'em
Drop and burn 'em up and scatter their remains, I'm
Lafayette!
Watch me engagin' em! Escapin' em!
Enragin' em! I'm-
Lafayette!
I go to France for more funds
Lafayette!
I come back with more guns

TRANSITION CONT'D

This moment superseded and eclipsed Sondheim's "Not Getting Married Today" as the fastest song on Broadway. This time, instead of only showing heightened emotions, he is showing urgency as well as presenting himself as a showman!

In the song "Right Hand Man" George Washington directly alludes to The Pirates of Penzance when he says,

Can I be real a second?
For just a millisecond?
Let down my guard and tell the people how I feel a second?
Now I'm the model of a modern major general
The venerated Virginian veteran whose men are all
Lining up to put me up on a pedestal, writing letters to relatives
Embellishing my elegance and eloquence
But the elephant is in the room
The truth is in your face
When you hear the British cannons go
Boom!

In an interview with The New York Times, Miranda reveals that Washington's character only uses his quickest linguistics when he is feeling comfortable enough to express frustration. Even in this iconic musical there is an allusion to George Washington, our first president, understanding that sometimes you talk a certain way, and at times it works to talk in other ways.

ADDED EXAMPLES

- Phineas and Ferb "I Really Don't Hate Christmas"
- Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along "Brand New Day."
- Muppets Most Wanted "Interrogation Song."

FINAL DISCUSSION ACTIVITY

Divide students into small groups. Assign each group a different character from The Pirates of Penzance besides the Major General.

- If each of these characters were to have their own Patter Song, what would it be about?
- What would each character's Patter Song reveal about them?
- Would the pace and intention of the Patter Song change for the character if their Patter Song happened at the beginning of the play versus the end?

Report back to the group.

EXTENDED ACTIVITY

Attempt working on a Patter Song to the tune of "Major General's Song" but compose it for different characters in the show.

STANDARDS

Missouri Fine Arts GLEs

National Standards

MU: Pr4B.8a (pg. 6)

FA 1, 2, 5

Compare the structure of contrasting pieces of music selected for performance, explaining how the elements of music are used in each.

MU: Pr4C.8a (pg. 7)

FA 1, 3

Perform contrasting pieces of music, demonstrating as well as explaining how the music's intent is conveyed by their interpretations of the elements of music and expressive qualities (such as dynamics, tempo, timbre, articulation/style, and phrasing).

MU: Re7B.8b (pg. 11)

FA 3, 5

Identify and compare the context of programs of music from a variety of genres, cultures, and historical periods.

MU: Re8A.8a (pg. 12)

FA 1, 3, 5

Support personal interpretation of contrasting programs of music and explain how creators or performers apply the elements of music and expressive qualities, within genres, cultures, and historical periods to convey expressive intent.

MU: Cn11A.8a (pg. 15)

FA 1, 3, 4, 5

Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

MU: Pr4C.C.1a (pg. 52)

FA 2, 3

Develop interpretations of works based on an understanding of the use of elements of music, style, and mood, explaining how the interpretive choices reflect the creators' intent.

MU: Re8A.C.1a (pg. 57)

FA 2, 3

Develop and explain interpretations of varied works, demonstrating an understanding of the composers' intent by citing technical and expressive aspects as well as the style/genre of each work.

Lesson Plan Developed by:
Adam Flores, MFA