

Introduction:

Composers throughout time have found interesting ways of writing music through chance. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is one of the most famous musicians credited with this style of composition. Chance compositions involve leaving some part of the composing process up to chance. In this lesson, we are going to be using the rolls of a die to generate a musical composition.

Target grade level: any - this lesson is adaptable for any grade level of students, as seen in plan below

Suggested time frame: 1 20-minute time block to compose musical idea, additional class periods suggested for learning to perform it and rehearsing as ensemble, if desired

Standards: NGSS and TEKS

Objectives: I can compose music within specific constraints..

Materials:

- Sample recording of Mozart's "[Musikalisches Würfspiel](#)"
- One die
- Empty cheeseball container, or similar clear plastic container
- Music manuscript paper (can be found [here](#))

Procedure

1. Introduce students to the idea of "chance compositions." DO NOT PLAY an example for the students yet. Share with students how some composers have composed musical pieces by rolling the dice. Ask students what they think that type of music would sound like. Would it be pleasant to listen to? Would it sound like a complete work of music?
2. After students have guessed what chance music might sound like, now share with students that one of the greatest composers of the past is credited with experimenting with this style of composition. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is believed to have written "Musikalisches Würfspiel" by composing very short musical ideas (motifs) and numbering them. He then rolled the dice to decide what order they would appear in his composition. Now play the students [this recording](#).
3. It is now time for the students to compose their own compositions as a class. This can be done a number of ways successfully. Here are some examples of implementing this lesson, based on class ability and age:
 - a. Beginning Ensembles - in class, allow each student to pick a note value and write it on the whiteboard in the front of the class. Have the class write in bar lines. If a note would be tied over a bar line, we just inserted a rest to make the bigger note value start the next measure (to make things easier and to give students a break in the music). Since the beginning band students know 6 notes by spring semester, we just assigned a note name to each side of the die (1=concert Bb, 2=concert C, etc). For orchestras, you could use selected notes from the D and A

strings; vocal groups could use Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol and repeat Do for the 6th side. You will then plug the note names into the cooperatively written rhythm line based off of the rolls of the die.

- b. Middle level ensembles - as a class, decide on a tonality to compose with - I gave students the choice of concert Bb (or try using the key of D for orchestra) blues, harmonic minor, or major. If you are short on time, or looking for a more global sound, you could also offer up pentatonic. Have each student (or section, if you prefer) come up with a 2-measure melodic idea. Assign each student a die side and a roll set. As the die rolls, plug each melodic idea into the composition. Don't forget to transpose each idea for all of the instruments in your band, if you are a band director.
- c. Advanced ensembles - start with the middle level ensemble instructions, but then have students/sections write a countermelody/background for another student/section's 2-measure melodic idea. After it is transposed for all students, have them play through the composition, asking them what they notice about the whole piece and how they are working to play it. Do they feel tired? How does it sound? Talk about how composers use layers of instruments/voices to create contrast in a composition. Now work with the students to decide which instruments/voice groups should perform during each musical idea, keeping in mind it doesn't always have to be the same each time that die number rolled (ex: sometimes flutes and trombones might play the flutes' melodic idea, but then the next time flutes and clarinets may perform the 2-measure idea when the number comes up).
- d. ALL LEVELS - after the students have learned the notes/rhythms of their chance piece, be sure to talk about interpretive elements - what do they want for tempo? How should the piece end? Where would be good places to change dynamics? Ritardandos? Finally, they should also vote on a name for the piece!

Assessment:

- Student participation in the chance composition project
- Musical beats and pitches are written correctly.

Extension:

- Work with the math department to discuss probability of the die landing on any given number
- Find other examples of chance compositions and have students compare and contrast with these musical ideas.

Use the teacher planning guides to decide which melodies get placed in which parabolas ([Dice Composition Planning Grid](#)) or which notes to use for each side of the die ([Dice Composition Beginning Ensemble Planning Guide](#))