

Melody and Meaning

For 5th-8th grades



Lesson 3 — *Composer Study: Beethoven and Okoye*

Objective

Students will become familiar with the life of two composers from different eras, Ludwig van Beethoven and Nkeiru Okoye [in KEAR roo oh KOY yeh]. They will understand what the music of these two composers share in common and how a composer's culture, heritage and life experience can affect his or her work.

Suggested Materials

- Fast Facts about Beethoven's 5th Symphony handout (provided)
 - Fast Facts about Nkeiru Okoye's "Voices Shouting Out" handout (provided)
- Recording of Beethoven's 5th Symphony, *1st movement* (audio links can be found at [youtube.com/user/BfloPhilharmonic](https://www.youtube.com/user/BfloPhilharmonic))
Recording of Okoye's "Voices Shouting Out" (audio links can be found at [youtube.com/user/BfloPhilharmonic](https://www.youtube.com/user/BfloPhilharmonic))

New York State Arts Standards

MU:Re7.1.5a	MU:Re7.1.6a	MU:Re7.1.7a	MU:Re7.1.8a
MU:Re7.2.5a	MU:Re7.2.6a/b	MU:Re7.2.7a/b	MU:Re7.2.8a
MU:Re8.1.5a	MU:Re8.1.6a	MU:Re8.1.7a	MU:Re8.1.8a

Common Core Learning Standards for ELA & Literacy

Reading, CCR 1, 2, 6 and 7
Writing, CCR 11
Speaking & Listening, CCR 1, 2 and 3
Language, CCR 1 and 6

Procedure

- 1) Introduce the lesson: We will listen and compare two pieces of music for orchestra – one that was written in 1808 and one that was written in 2002, almost 200 years apart. We will find what is similar between the two pieces and what is different. We will also discuss ways that each composer's culture, heritage, and life experiences may be represented in the music that they wrote.
- 2) Play the opening of Beethoven's 5th Symphony for students. Discuss: Is this music familiar to them? Where have they heard it before? Do they know who wrote it and/or what it is called?
- 3) Play the opening of Beethoven's 5th Symphony again and ask students to think about a couple of questions while they are listening: How would they describe this music? What instruments do they hear? What kind of pulse do they feel? Do they hear any rhythms, patterns or melodies repeating? Add any questions that you think are important. After listening for a while, ask students to share their responses to the questions and discuss.
- 4) Now play the opening of Okoye's "Voices Shouting Out." Ask students to think about the same questions that you asked with the Beethoven: Is this music familiar to them? How would they describe this music? What instruments do they hear? What kind of pulse do they feel? Do they hear any rhythms, patterns or melodies repeating? Etc.

Lesson 3 — *Composer Study: Beethoven and Okoye* (continued)

- 5) Ask students to identify what they think is similar between the two pieces of music. Make a list for all to see. What is different between the pieces? Make a separate list for the observations of differences.
- 6) Now share the two Fast Facts handouts on Beethoven's 5th Symphony and Okoye's *Voices Shouting Out* and give students time to read them. Then, discuss: Beethoven's heritage was European; German to be specific. He was born in Bonn, Germany and lived in Vienna, Austria for most of his life. He was plagued with physical maladies, the most severe of which was going deaf. Nkeiru Okoye's heritage is African American and Nigerian. She was born in New York City and lives there still, teaching and writing music. Discuss with students: How might the music that they just heard reflect each composer's culture, heritage and life experience? Could they hear influences of Beethoven's European background in his music or his struggles in life? How about influences of Okoye's African American and Nigerian heritage or her experiences living in an urban environment?

Extending the Learning:

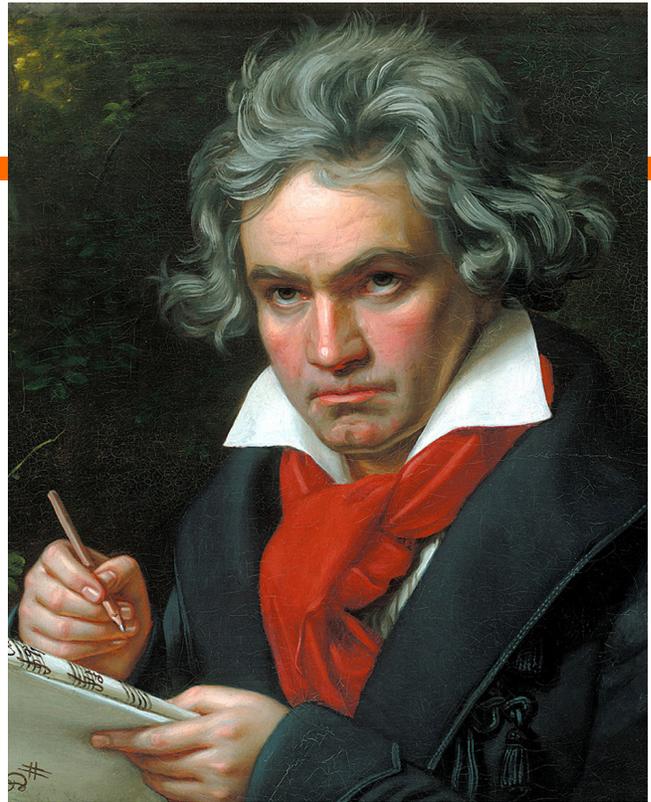
- 7) Students may bring in music that they feel reflects their own heritage, culture and life experiences. Share these musical selections with the class and ask the student to say why they feel their selection reflects their background.

Fast Facts

Ludwig van Beethoven

Symphony No. 5, 1st movement

- Born in Bonn, Germany
- Moved to Vienna to study music with Haydn
- Established a career as a virtuoso pianist and a composer
- Began losing his hearing
- Wrote Symphony No. 5
- Became completely deaf by age 40
- Wrote his last symphony, No. 9, among other admired works
- Died in Vienna, Austria



The Composer

Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany in 1770. His musical gifts were nurtured at a young age by his father, Johann van Beethoven (who was a musician and teacher). In 1792 when he was in his 20's, he moved to Vienna and studied music with the great Classical composer Joseph Haydn. He became a virtuosic pianist and established his reputation in the salons of Vienna, improvising and performing great piano works. Of course, he also began writing music and it soon became clear that he excelled in that as well.

Unfortunately, his hearing began to deteriorate in his late 20's and he had completely lost his hearing by 1816. This loss, in addition to other chronic illnesses, led Beethoven to contemplate suicide, as is documented in a letter he wrote, now called the Heiligenstadt Testament. Despite his despair over his hearing loss, he continued his composing. A great number of his most admired pieces were written at a time when he was deaf, including his triumphant 9th Symphony, which contains 'Ode to Joy.' He died in Vienna in 1827.

The Piece

His 5th Symphony was written just as he began to lose his hearing. He wrote to a friend that he would "seize Fate by the throat; it shall not bend or crush me completely." It is the first symphony that he wrote in a minor key and it is said that the opening four notes of this symphony, which are repeated throughout the piece, represented "Fate" as it "knocks at the door." You can hear this four-note motive continuously through the first movement, in fact, almost every element comes from the rhythm or the interval presented at the very beginning.

Not long after the 5th Symphony was performed it was called "one of the most important works of the time." It has since then undoubtedly become one of the most important works of all time.

You will ask me where I get my ideas. That I cannot tell you with certainty; they come unsummoned, directly, indirectly, --I could seize them with my hands, --out in the open air; in the woods; while walking; in the silence of the nights; early in the morning; incited by moods, which are translated by the poet into words, by me into tones that sound, and roar and storm about me until I have set them down in notes."

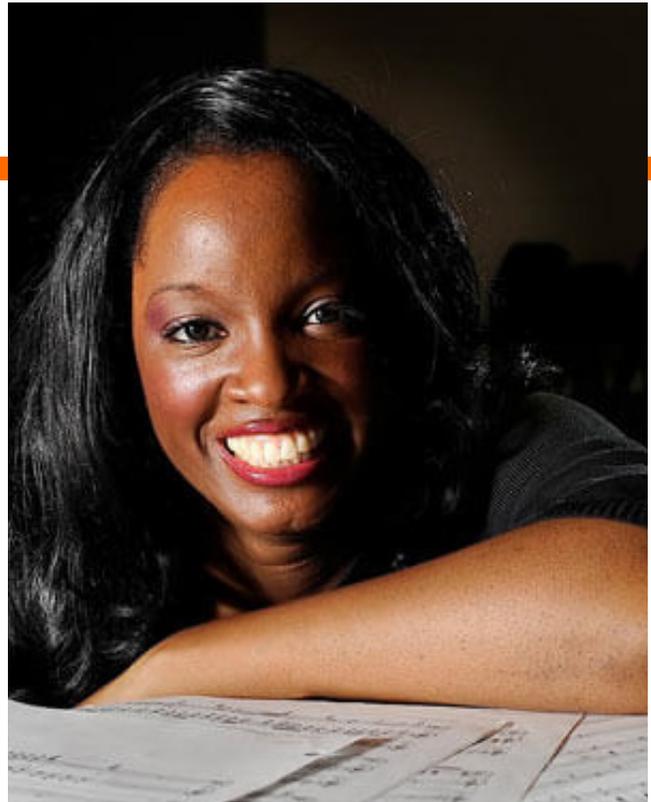
— Beethoven

Fast Facts

Nkeiru Okoye

Voices Shouting Out

- Born in New York City
- Studied piano at the Manhattan School of Music, Preparatory Division
- Wrote first composition at age 13 which won first place in national competition
- Studied composition at Oberlin Conservatory, OH
- Earned advanced degrees in composition and music theory at Rutgers University, NJ
- Commissioned to write *Voices Shouting Out*
- Wrote notable works including *Phillis Wheatley*, *Harriet Tubman*, *African Sketches* and *Brooklyn Cinderella*
- Currently teaches composition and music theory at SUNY New Paltz, while continuing to write music



The Composer

Nkeiru Okoye was born and raised in New York by a Nigerian father and an African-American mother. She studied piano at the Manhattan School of Music Preparatory Division as a young person. After writing her first composition at age 13 which won first prize at a national competition, she decided to pursue training as a composer. She went on to earn a Bachelor's degree in music theory and composition at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, and a master's and Ph.D. in theory and composition at Rutgers University.

Okoye has been inspired to write music celebrating iconic Black women in history such as Phillis Wheatley and Harriet Tubman. She enjoys writing music in a wide variety of styles. Other works include *Brooklyn Cinderella*, *African Sketches* and *Voices Shouting Out*. She is also a visual artist who creates soft sculpture multicultural dolls, some of which reside in the Smithsonian. She is currently the director of Music Theory and Composition at the State University of New York at New Paltz.

The Piece

Voices Shouting Out was written in the wake of 9/11. Okoye set out to write a piece that expressed her grief after the terrible event, but ended up instead writing an optimistic affirmation of the necessary unity of all people. Okoye explains: "In the end, rather than 'crying out,' my official response was *Voices Shouting Out* in freedom, as it were, through the music. It was a march to acknowledge those fighting on behalf of our safety, and yet a sparkling celebration of life for those of us who continue living." She began writing the piece in 2001 and it was first performed in February of 2002 by the Virginia Symphony.

*"Composing is an expression of music in my soul. Like many other composers, creatively, I do gravitate towards subjects and sounds that reflect my heritage. I write whatever music comes into my head. There's a pop song in the middle of my piece *Voices Shouting Out*, along with some funk and a tone row. It's all music."*

— Nkeiru Okoye