

LESSON PLAN | MIDDLE SCHOOL

OSCAR PETERSON

HIS LIFE, MUSIC, AND LEGACY

BY MARILENA MURGAN

GRADES

4-8

SUBJECTS

Music, Visual Arts, Social Studies,
History, Language Arts

DURATION

4-6 classes

EXPECTATIONS AND OUTCOMES

Students will:

- ♪ Learn about Oscar Peterson's life and contributions to music;
- ♪ Explore jazz as a musical genre and its cultural impact;
- ♪ Develop an understanding of resilience, diversity, and creativity in the arts;
- ♪ Make connections between historical figures and their own experiences.

MATERIALS REQUIRED

- ♪ *When Freedom Sings: The Music and Melodies of Oscar Peterson* graphic novel
- ♪ Additional books about Oscar Peterson
- ♪ Prepared **Worksheets #1-5**
- ♪ Optional: art supplies, musical instruments

BIG QUESTIONS

- ♪ Who was Oscar Peterson and what was his impact on music and society?
- ♪ How does music tell a story and preserve cultural history?
- ♪ What challenges did Oscar Peterson face and how did he overcome them?
- ♪ What makes a great musician and leader?

KEY CONCEPTS AND ISSUES

- ♪ Oscar Peterson's contributions to music and society
- ♪ Jazz as a musical genre and its cultural significance
- ♪ Overcoming racial barriers and challenges
- ♪ Music as a form of storytelling and activism
- ♪ The role of historical figures in shaping identity and culture
- ♪ The impact of Black artists in Canadian and global history

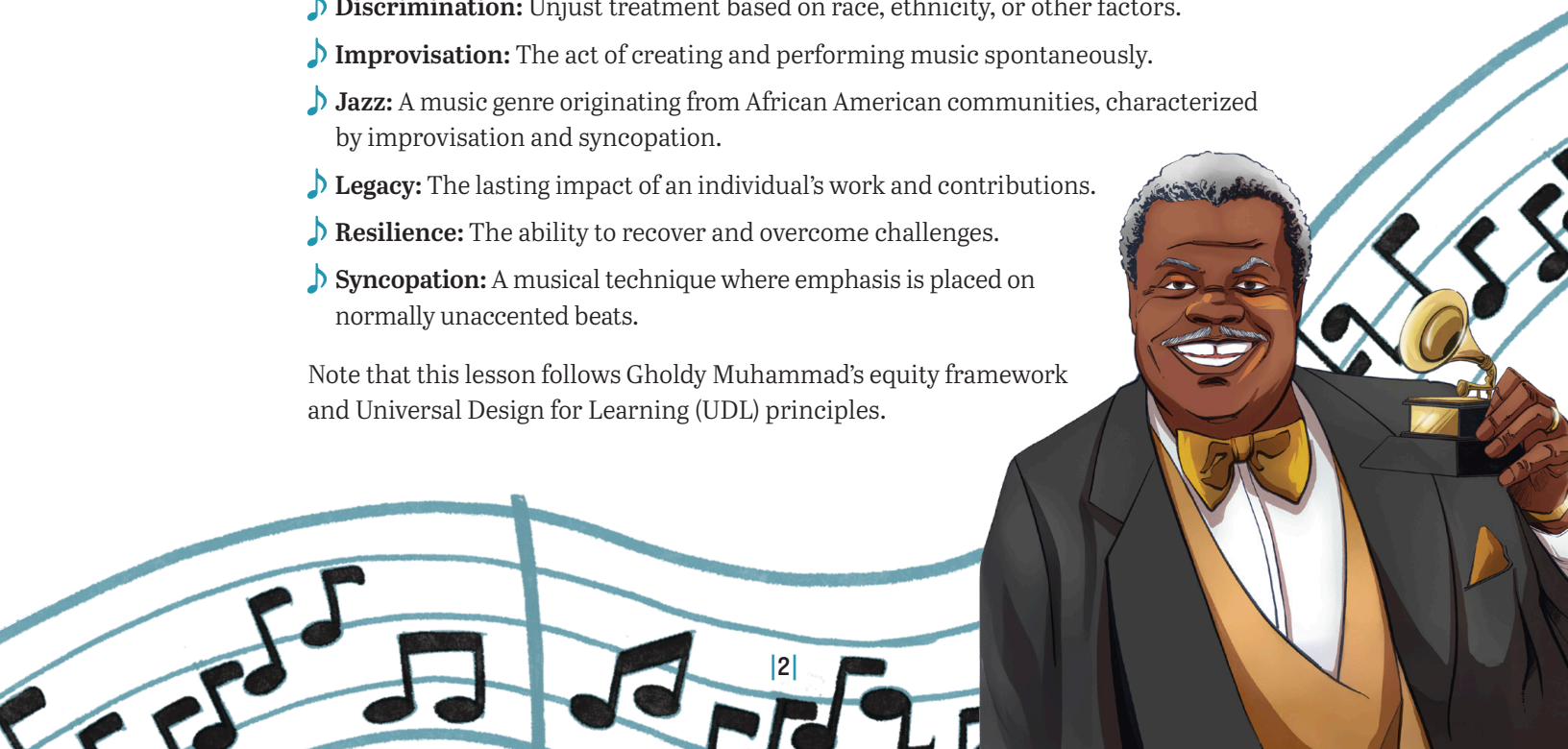
THEMES

Identity and self-expression, perseverance and overcoming adversity, cultural heritage and storytelling, musical innovation and creativity

KEY VOCABULARY

- ♪ **Activism:** Efforts to promote social or political change.
- ♪ **Cultural heritage:** Traditions, values, and artistic expressions passed down through generations.
- ♪ **Discrimination:** Unjust treatment based on race, ethnicity, or other factors.
- ♪ **Improvisation:** The act of creating and performing music spontaneously.
- ♪ **Jazz:** A music genre originating from African American communities, characterized by improvisation and syncopation.
- ♪ **Legacy:** The lasting impact of an individual's work and contributions.
- ♪ **Resilience:** The ability to recover and overcome challenges.
- ♪ **Syncopation:** A musical technique where emphasis is placed on normally unaccented beats.

Note that this lesson follows Ghoddy Muhammad's equity framework and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles.



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Oscar Peterson (1925-2007) was a world-renowned Canadian jazz pianist, composer, and educator, often referred to as one of the greatest jazz musicians of all time. Born in Montreal, Quebec, Peterson demonstrated extraordinary musical talent from a young age, overcoming tuberculosis as a child to pursue his passion for piano.

Throughout his career, he won multiple Grammy Awards, recorded over 200 albums, and performed with legendary artists such as Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington. His signature blend of technical mastery, improvisational brilliance, and deep emotional expression helped define modern jazz.

Beyond his musical achievements, Peterson was a strong advocate for racial equality, using his music to challenge discrimination in the music industry. His composition “Hymn to Freedom” became an anthem for the civil rights movement. As a proud Black Canadian, Peterson’s legacy continues to inspire musicians and historians alike, solidifying his place as a key figure in both Canadian and global cultural history.



STEP 1

IDENTITY: WHO WAS OSCAR PETERSON?

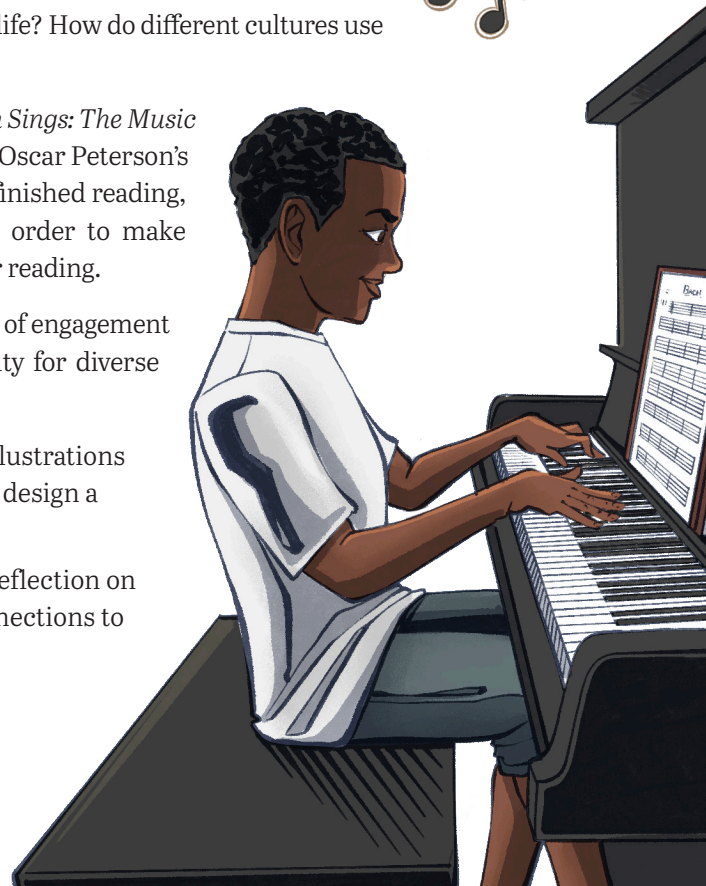
In this step, students will explore their own connections to music based on Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP). To begin, distribute **Worksheet #1** and have students fill out the K and W sections of the KWL chart in order to activate their prior knowledge.

As a class, discuss: What role does music play in your life? How do different cultures use music to tell stories?

Next, have students read **pages 1-18** of *When Freedom Sings: The Music and Melodies of Oscar Peterson* as an introduction to Oscar Peterson’s childhood and musical beginnings. Once they have finished reading, they can complete the Text Connections chart in order to make personal, literary, and real-world connections to their reading.

UDL Strategy: Provide students with multiple means of engagement to demonstrate understanding, ensuring accessibility for diverse learners. Sample activities could include:

-  **Drawing and Visual Arts:** Have students create illustrations of key moments in Oscar Peterson’s childhood, or design a book cover that represents his musical journey.
-  **Journal Writing:** Students can write a personal reflection on how music influences their own life, drawing connections to Oscar Peterson’s experiences.



- 🎵 **Class Discussions:** Facilitate small-group or whole-class discussions on themes such as perseverance, racism, and the role of music in storytelling.
- 🎵 **Storyboard Creation:** Students can develop a storyboard summarizing the key events of Oscar Peterson's early life.

Set up a gallery walk, displaying students' reflections (e.g. drawings, writings, collages, multimedia projects, etc.) around the room for a peer-led discussion.

To end this step, have students fill out the L section of their KWL charts. Encourage them to consider what they have learned from their reading, as well as from their classmates' creations.

STEP 2

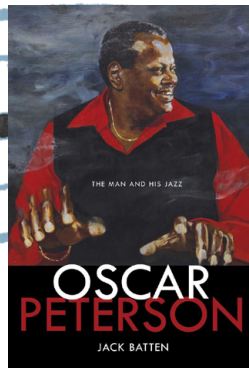
SKILLS: READING, LISTENING, THINKING

Here, students will build on their reading comprehension skills by analyzing additional books about Oscar Peterson.

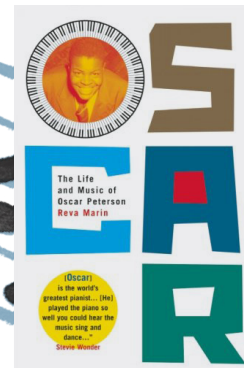
Offer a selection of texts, such as:



Oscar Lives Next Door: A Story Inspired by Oscar Peterson's Childhood by Bonnie Farmer, illustrated by Marie Lafrance (Owlkids, 2023)



Oscar Peterson: The Man and His Jazz by Jack Batten (Tundra Books, 2012)



Oscar: The Life and Music of Oscar Peterson by Reva Marin (Groundwood Books, 2008)

Students can finish reading *When Freedom Sings: The Music and Melodies of Oscar Peterson*, then compare/contrast it with excerpts from any of the three books listed above, identifying common themes and recording what they've learned about Oscar Peterson on the T-Chart in **Worksheet #2**.

Choose either of the following suggested activities:

- 🎵 **Guided Reading Questions:** Develop comprehension questions focusing on key events in Oscar Peterson's life, his challenges, and his contributions to music.
- 🎵 **Think-Pair-Share:** Students read a passage, summarize it with a partner, and share their understanding with the class.

Next, students will practice their listening skills as they're introduced to Oscar Peterson's music.

Play a selection of Oscar Peterson's recordings (e.g. "Georgia On My Mind," "C Jam Blues," "Summertime," "You Look Good to Me," etc.) and have students complete the Listening Reflection chart in **Worksheet #2** to help them analyze and respond to his music.

Choose from one or several of the following suggested activities:

- ♪ **Music Analysis:** Have students describe the mood, tempo, and improvisation techniques used.
- ♪ **Compare Interpretations:** Play different renditions of "Georgia on My Mind" (e.g. Ray Charles vs. Oscar Peterson) and discuss stylistic differences.
- ♪ **Visualization:** Ask students to draw or write a story based on how the music makes them feel.
- ♪ **Rhythm and Beat Exploration:** Have students tap or clap along to identify syncopation and other jazz elements in Peterson's music.

Here, students will expand their critical thinking skills by comparing Oscar Peterson's experiences with those of other historical jazz musicians.

Famous jazz musicians (a resource list):

- ♪ "42 Legendary Jazz Artists" (<https://jazzfuel.com/best-jazz-musicians/>)
- ♪ "The Best Jazz Musicians of All-Time" (<https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/best-jazz-musicians/>)
- ♪ "Jazz History, Great Jazz Players, and Why They Last" (<https://www.bloomschoolofjazz.com/great-jazz-players>)

Choose from one or several of the following suggested activities:

- ♪ **Musical Timeline:** Have students create a timeline of jazz musicians, noting how each influenced the genre and where Oscar Peterson fits in.
- ♪ **Debate:** Hold a class debate on what makes a musician "great" and compare Oscar Peterson's impact to other historical musicians.
- ♪ **Cause and Effect:** Students can analyze how racial barriers affected Oscar Peterson's career and compare them to challenges faced by other musicians.
- ♪ **Persuasive Writing:** Have students write a letter nominating Oscar Peterson for a "Greatest Jazz Musician" award, justifying their choice with evidence.

UDL Strategies:

- ♪ Offer audio support, such as [Google Read&Write](#), to assist students who prefer listening to text rather than reading it.
- ♪ Utilize graphic organizers, such as Venn diagrams, to help students compare and contrast jazz musicians of their choice.



STEP 3

INTELLECT: EXPLORING JAZZ AND OSCAR PETERSON'S LEGACY

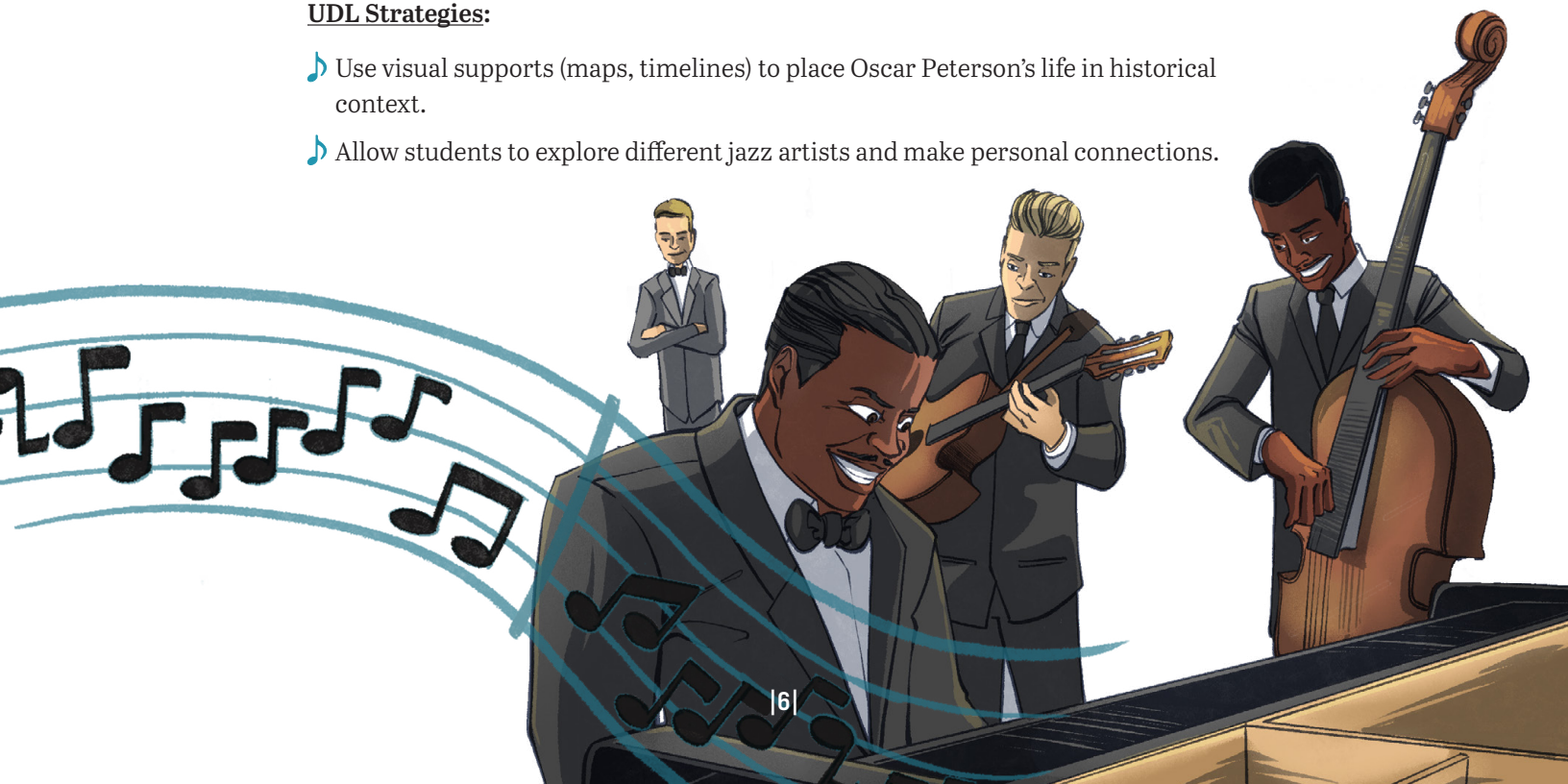
In order to provide some cultural context for this step, initiate a discussion of how jazz has been a voice for social change and resistance throughout history. Students can use **Worksheet #3** to record notes from this discussion.

Choose from one or several of the following suggested activities:

- ♪ **Influences and Inspirations:** Have students research other Black Canadian musicians or artists of Peterson's time to see how they influenced each other.
- ♪ **Musical Techniques:** Break down some of Oscar Peterson's piano techniques—like swing rhythm or improvisation—and let students try them out on instruments or apps. Then compare the structure and style of Peterson's compositions with traditional blues songs to show students how jazz evolved.
- ♪ **Art and Music Integrations:** Students can create artwork inspired by the emotions or stories within Oscar Peterson's music. Alternatively, develop a class mural representing key moments in Black history and jazz culture.
- ♪ **Community Connections:** Invite a local jazz musician or historian to talk about Oscar Peterson's impact on Canadian music. Alternatively, visit a virtual jazz museum or take a field trip to a local cultural centre focused on Black history.
- ♪ **Creative Writing:** Students can write a fictional diary entry from Oscar Peterson's perspective, reflecting on key events in his career. Or they may create a newspaper article announcing one of Oscar Peterson's performances, highlighting its significance in breaking racial barriers.

UDL Strategies:

- ♪ Use visual supports (maps, timelines) to place Oscar Peterson's life in historical context.
- ♪ Allow students to explore different jazz artists and make personal connections.



STEP 4

CRITICALITY: “HYMN TO FREEDOM” SONG ANALYSIS

Begin by exploring the racial barriers Oscar Peterson faced in Canada and internationally. Afterwards, play several versions of his song “Hymn to Freedom” for the class (both with and without lyrics):

- ♪ The Oscar Peterson Quartet performing live at Queen Elizabeth II’s Golden Jubilee Gala, 2002 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ob99Ct9CSCc>)
- ♪ Recording of “Hymn to Freedom” from the Oscar Peterson Trio’s album, *Night Train*, 1963 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uy25C_s288g)
- ♪ Live performance by pianist Corey Butler and vocalist Jackie Richardson at the Harbourfront Centre Theatre, Toronto, 2017 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSrFOAY-MCM>)

Individually, students will consider the song’s message of unity and social justice by completing the Facts, Questions, Opinions, and Connections chart on **Worksheet #4**. You may wish to display the lyrics at the front of the classroom or on an interactive whiteboard as they do so. Afterwards, students will write their own lyrics inspired by the themes in “Hymn to Freedom.”

End this step by facilitating a whole-class discussion around the following question: How did Oscar Peterson use music as a form of activism?

Optional extension activities:

- ♪ **Lyric Analysis:** Compare the lyrics of “Hymn to Freedom” to other civil rights songs, such as “We Shall Overcome” played by different artists (Pete Seeger, Mahalia Jackson, Joan Baez, Louis Armstrong, Bruce Springsteen, etc.), to find common themes.
- ♪ **Historical Comparison:** Students can compare Oscar Peterson’s advocacy for racial equality to musicians like Nina Simone, who also used music for activism (e.g. her song “Ain’t Got No, I Got Life”).

UDL Strategy: Provide multiple ways for students to respond (e.g. oral discussion, written reflection, multimedia projects, etc.).



STEP 5

JOY: JAZZ-INSPIRED CULMINATING PROJECT

Have students reflect on what they have learned throughout this lesson by completing the 3-2-1 chart on **Worksheet #5**.

As a final demonstration of their learning, students will then create a jazz-inspired art piece, poem, or song. They can record ideas using the Brainstorming chart provided on the worksheet.

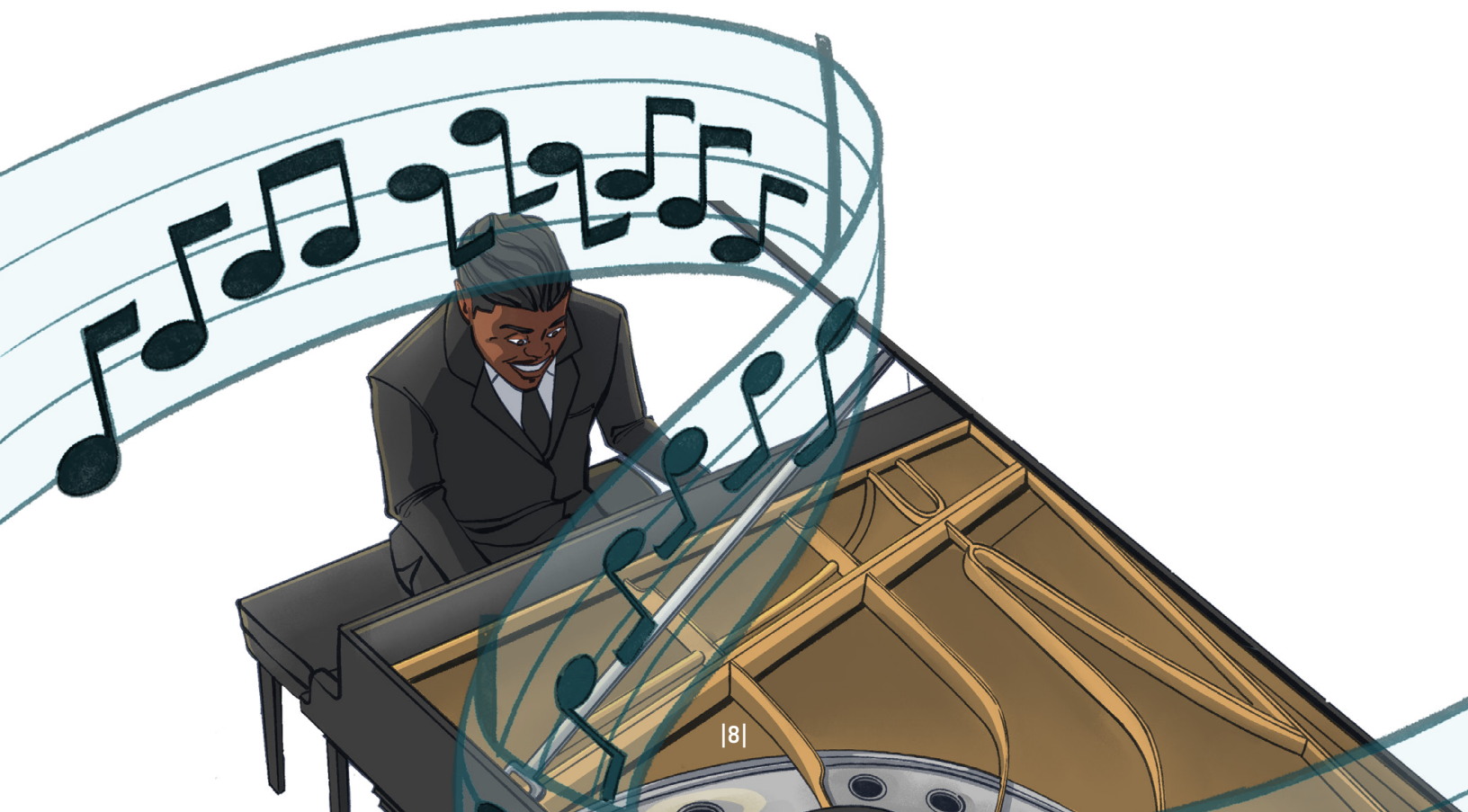
Celebrate student creativity by showcasing their completed projects in a classroom jazz gallery.

UDL Strategies:

- ♪ Give students choice in their final project format (i.e. art, music, writing).
- ♪ Encourage collaboration through group activities.



Marilena Murgan is an educator with more than 20 years of experience in various subject areas across all grade levels. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Physics and Chemistry, a Bachelor of Education, and a Master of Education in Curriculum Studies. Marilena's main goal as an educator is to make school fun and to include all students in the journey of learning!



RUBRIC

Assessment	Level 1 (50-59%)	Level 2 (60-69%)	Level 3 (70-79%)	Level 4 (80-89%)	Level 4+ (90-100%)
Knowledge and Understanding	Student demonstrated limited knowledge and comprehension of the key concepts, issues, and themes.	Student demonstrated some knowledge and comprehension of the key concepts, issues, and themes.	Student demonstrated good knowledge and comprehension of the key concepts, issues, and themes.	Student demonstrated great knowledge and comprehension of the key concepts, issues, and themes.	Student demonstrated outstanding knowledge and comprehension of the key concepts, issues, and themes.
Thinking and Inquiry	Student's planning and processing skills were not evident; student demonstrated critical and creative thinking processes with limited proficiency.	Student's planning and processing skills were somewhat evident; student demonstrated critical and creative thinking processes with some proficiency.	Student's planning and processing skills were evident; student demonstrated critical and creative thinking processes with good proficiency.	Student's planning and processing skills were very evident; student demonstrated critical and creative thinking processes with great proficiency.	Student's planning and processing skills were extremely evident; student demonstrated critical and creative thinking processes with outstanding proficiency.
Communication	Student communicated their understanding of the key concepts, issues, and themes with limited proficiency.	Student communicated their understanding of the key concepts, issues, and themes with some proficiency.	Student communicated their understanding of the key concepts, issues, and themes with good proficiency.	Student communicated their understanding of the key concepts, issues, and themes with great proficiency.	Student communicated their understanding of the key concepts, issues, and themes with outstanding proficiency.
Application	Student used knowledge and understanding of the key concepts, issues, and themes to complete their assignments with limited proficiency.	Student used knowledge and understanding of the key concepts, issues, and themes to complete their assignments with some proficiency.	Student used knowledge and understanding of the key concepts, issues, and themes to complete their assignments with good proficiency.	Student used knowledge and understanding of the key concepts, issues, and themes to complete their assignments with great proficiency.	Student used knowledge and understanding of the key concepts, issues, and themes to complete their assignments with outstanding proficiency.

