

## Kodály in Your Classroom by Dr. Shelly Cooper, University of Arizona

“Train Is A-Comin’” is an African American Spiritual. Many spirituals were sung by slaves to communicate secret messages about the Underground Railroad. “Train Is A-Comin’” referred to the freedom train (meaning the Underground Railroad) that would take them to a better life where they could live as free men and women. The codes hidden within the songs provided directions, information, and warnings. Most slaves were forbidden from learning to read or write so songs often served as their source of communication.

Folk songs hold a special place in my heart and they also provide multiple opportunities for music learning. Lessons incorporating folk songs can meet the MENC: The National Association for Music Education National Standards, your district standards, state standards and/or a Kodály-based curriculum. The following lesson, based on “*Train Is A-Comin’*,” incorporates singing, playing, reading, writing, composing, movement, cultural context, and also makes curricular connections with the regular classroom through children’s literature books.

**Concepts:** ta, ti ti, quarter rest; steady beat; 4-beat phrases; 4/4 meter; singing in tune; rhythmic ostinato; playing instruments; singing harmony; tempo markings

**Materials:** Train icons with ta, ti ti, and quarter rest patterns  
(see AKTS website for a full-size pdf file ready for download)  
Children’s Books

**Train Is A-Comin'**  
African American Spiritual



Train is a - com - in', oh yes. Train is a - com - in', oh, yes.

Train is a - com - in', train is a - com - in', Train is a - com - in', oh, yes.

### Verse 2

Better get your ticket, oh, yes  
Better get your ticket, oh, yes  
Better get your ticket,  
Better get your ticket,  
Better get your ticket, oh, yes

### Verse 3

Room for many others, oh, yes  
Room for many others, oh, yes  
Room for many others,  
Room for many others  
Room for many others, oh, yes

### Verse 4

Train is a-leavin', oh, yes  
Train is a-leavin', oh, yes  
Train is a-leavin',  
Train is a-leavin'  
Train is a-leavin', oh, yes

### Vocal Inflection/Steady Beat

Have students tap/pat a steady beat on their knees while saying the poem “Engine, Engine Number 9.” Widely vary the vocal inflection to warm-up the vocal chords for singing.

### Singing

While teaching the song, incorporate movements to help students learn the words and to reinforce the steady beat throughout the song.

- Train is A-Comin’ – have arms moving in a “chugging” pattern to imitate train wheels
- Better Get Your Ticket – matching the beat, pantomime passing out tickets moving in a left-to-right pattern (remember to mirror motion so that students are always moving from *their* left to right). After “passing out” four tickets move back to the left side of body to also reinforce meter in 4. Repeat throughout verse.
- Room for Many Others – matching the beat, pantomime counting the empty chairs and move in a left-to-right pattern as on verse two.
- Train is A-Leavin’ – repeat the “chugging” motion of verse one.

### Cultural Context

Provide a brief synopsis (as age appropriate) of the Underground Railroad movement. Explain how the slaves often provided directions for escaping to freedom through their songs. Ask the children to “translate” the meaning of the various verses of the folk song.

### Instrumental Accompaniment

Have students add rhythmic ostinati, as notated below, to accompany the song. Follow the sequence of speaking the words, adding body percussion, and then transferring to instruments for all patterns.

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Rhythmic Ostinati

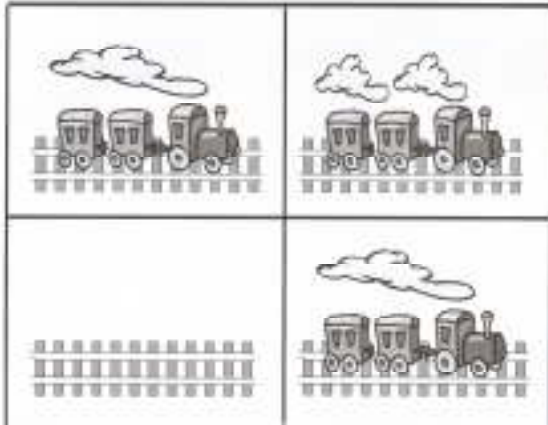
Choo, choo, choo, chug - ga. (Hand "swish claps" - brushing back and forth transfer to Afuche and/or sandblocks)

Get your tic - ket (Pat transfer to woodblock or cowbell)

Train (Stamp transfer to hand drums)

### Rhythm Reading/Decoding

Using the train icon cards, have children derive/write the rhythm of the melody and/or the poem “Engine, Engine Number 9.” They can also derive/write the pattern of the “page-turn-rhythm” for the book *Train Leaves the Station*.



(Note: two puffs of smoke = ti ti; one puff of smoke = ta; empty train tracks = quarter rest)  
Make enough cards as needed to complete the tasks.

### Composition

Using the train icon cards, have children create new rhythmic ostinati.

### Singing Harmony

For older grades, add the optional harmony. Bring your students' attention to the last measure and have them identify whether it is the same or different from the melody.

Optional Harmony

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Train's a - com - in', Train's a - com - in', Train's a - com - in', down the track

See it com - in'. Train's a - com - in', oh, yes.

### Children's Literature Connection

Younger Grades:

*Train Leaves the Station* by Eve Merriam and Dale Gottlieb

While reading text, repeat the ending phrase that incorporates the time of departure for the train while incorporating vocal inflection. (Example: "train leaves the station at one-o-one, one-o-one, one-o-one, the train leaves the station at one-o-one") Children will quickly add the repeating sections to the remainder of the book "two-o-two," "three-o-three," etc.

Have children say: "chugga chugga chugga chugga choo choo" before turning the page. Encourage the "choo choo" to be a high "sung" pitch in contrast to the spoken "chugga chugga."

Other suitable selections for younger students:

*Puff Puff Chugga Chugga* by Christopher Wormell

*Chugga Chugga Choo Choo* by Kevin Lewis

Older Grades:

*Follow the Drinking Gourd* by Jeanette Winter

**Tempo Game**

Create a train path on a bulletin board in your classroom or on a large poster board have the children place various tempo markings along the path. Singing a familiar song (preferably another song that incorporates the word train), have your finger travel (or use a small train) along the train tracks. Appropriately adjust the speed of the singing to match the various tempo markings. Have children take turns being the “engineer” and moving the train along the track.