

## Inspired by Haiku: Movement and Music Composition

### By Marjie Van Gunten

Suggested grade level: upper elementary/middle school

#### Objectives:

- Creative movement: Use previously experienced dance elements: shape, levels, and pathway.
- Composition: Use a movement “score” to create an original composition.
- Connections to literature: Create a new work of art inspired by haiku, a poetic form that uses few words to express a bigger idea.

#### Materials:

- Original haiku for models (working from Japanese haiku masters is recommended)
- Space for movement
- Pitched and unpitched percussion

#### Resources:

- *Cool Melons – Turn to Frogs! The Life and Poems of Issa*; story and haiku translations by Matthew Gollub
- *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku*; by William Higginson

Background information: What haiku is can best be explained in a quote from *The Haiku Handbook* by William Higginson (p. 5): “When we compose haiku we are saying, ‘It is hard to tell you how I am feeling. Perhaps if I share with you the event that made me aware of these feelings, you will have similar feelings of your own.’...Unless we tell *what* it is that makes us feel sad or happy, how can (others) share our feelings....haiku is the answer to this *what*.”

Haiku has its origin in earlier poetic forms tanka (12th c.) and renga (15th c.). This poetry was written by Zen monks from an aesthetic of austerity and was filled with images that strike deep into the writer’s feelings about the world. Some Western teachers have fallen into defining haiku as a 17-syllable poem in three lines of 5-7-5. In fact, Japanese poets do not count syllables; rather they count *onji* or sound symbols. While in earlier times an *onji* did represent a single syllable, changes in the language now mean that this is no longer the case. Haiku may be 17 *onji* and need not be divided into the 5-7-5 pattern. It is interesting to note that when translating traditional Japanese haiku into English, the average number of syllables in each haiku comes out to be only 12.

Process: This is a small group activity. An ideal group size is 6 students to facilitate having some dancers and some instrumentalists for the final performance. However, it is possible to work with smaller groups and allow students to “borrow” students from another group for the instrument parts so that the creative movement piece is not compromised.

1. Scatter several haiku on the floor of the room. Ask the students to wander among the haiku and read each poem. Then ask students select one they like, without sharing their choice with others. Teacher asks students to raise a hand when their favorite is read. Use these choices to divide the class into working groups. If necessary, two groups may work on the same poem to keep groups to an appropriate number of students.
2. Study the haiku and identify one key word in each line. Encourage students to select words that evoke a strong visual image or emotion. Underline the selected words. For example (using a haiku by Issa):

*Lilies blooming  
thick and fast  
 a skylark's lonesome cry.*

3. As a group, decide on a silent, group shape for each underlined word. Encourage this physical shape to be expressive of the quality of the word, not a literal physical expression of the word. (Using the example above: What does it mean to bloom? Does blooming all happen at once? How might the group show various stages of blooming? How can a group show the idea of thick? How might you contrast “lonesome” with “thick”?)
4. Practice all three shapes. Have you made use of different levels within the shapes...or between the shapes? If not, how can you refine the shapes to include your understanding of levels? Now decide on a place in the room to perform each shape.
5. Now that you have 3 shapes that relate to your haiku, think about how you will move from the first...to the second...to the third. What would be the pathway: straight line, curve, other? What type of body movement will you use? Will your movement include changes of level? What will be the tempo/tempi?
6. Rehearse your movement composition: be sure to have a clear starting and ending shape; plan how to long to hold each shape.
7. Share the movement composition with the larger class.
8. Return to small groups to create a musical composition using the movement as a “score” for the music. Some questions to consider as you combine movement and music (it helps to post these questions for students to see as they work):
  - What timbre will you use?
  - Will your composition be rhythmic...or melodic...or both?
  - How will you convey the feeling of each of the word-shapes you created?
  - Will you use traveling music between the shapes?
  - Remember that haiku use very few words to convey a very big idea...how does this translate into music?
  - Do you want to include text from the haiku in any way? As an introduction? Coda? Interlude? Part of the timbre or texture?
  - How will you divide the roles of movement and playing instruments? If your movement is dependent on all members of your group, you may need to “borrow” some instrument players from another group.

9. Try out your movement and music together. Does the music support the movement? Be sure to ask the dancers how it felt to add the music to their “score.” Before you begin your final rehearsal, discuss with the group how well you have re-created the concept of using just a few words to express a big idea through your work. Refine your composition based on these conversations.
10. Rehearse and then share the movement/music composition with the whole class.

Follow-up writing activity: Students may write haiku inspired by nature photographs or copies of Japanese woodblock prints. One way to help get them started is to create a “frame” (cut a small square out of a larger piece of paper) and then slide the “frame” over the print to select a small part of the whole that suggests to the student the most important part of this print (the *what* that Higginson describes in *The Haiku Handbook*). Use this small section of the print as the inspiration for a 3-line poem of no more than 17 syllables (the number of syllables per line is not important). This activity works best when it immediately follows the movement/music process. When I did this activity with two groups of students, one did the writing immediately after the music lesson, the other did the writing the next day. The difference in the quality of expressive of language for the group who had an opportunity to write immediately after the music experience was amazing, and impressed on me the importance of creating an aesthetic space in the creative journey! Ideally, the classroom teacher will join you on this artistic adventure.