



Matthew Whitaker Quartet

Streaming February 17 – 24

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How to use this Engagement Guide

If you have photos or lesson plans to share, please let us know! Use #MatthewWhitaker@cal

This engagement guide is organized around 4 key artistic practices (as identified by the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards at <http://nccas.wikispaces.com/>)

Investigating: Questioning, exploring and challenging.

Imagining: Opening the door to what's possible, and even to what seems impossible.

Creating: Making artistic choices with a work of art in mind.

Connecting: Reflecting on both process and product and making connections to other aspects of life and study.

This Engagement Guide invites exploration before and after the performance, giving each student tools to make personal and meaningful connections during the show. You'll be able to link to specific subjects that you or your students may want more information about.

We've included a pre-performance engagement activity and a post-performance activity for artistic practice and reflection. By no means should you feel limited by these suggestions! Go, make art, learn more...and share your experiences where you can.

Artistic Literacy: Having the skills and knowledge you need to connect meaningfully with works of art—that's what we mean by artistic literacy. We think that means something different than knowing the names of all the different instruments musicians might play, or being able to reproduce the exact melodies you might hear during a show. To us at Cal Performances, it means you and your students will have a significant glimpse into the artistic process and will have a chance to try to solve the problems the artists aim to solve creatively. It means that the next time you see a performance, you'll be able to use these same insights to connect with a work of art through the artist's process and that this will deepen your experience as an audience member.

Artistically literate student audiences come to understand that every artist draws from a core set of concepts skillfully chosen and applied in performance to create a work of art both unique to the artist, and connected to other works of art.

And along the way, we hope that students of all ages—and their teachers and adult mentors—will be inspired to experiment with artistic decision-making and creativity themselves.

Enjoy the show!



About the Matthew Whitaker Quartet

The Matthew Whitaker Quartet includes:

- Matthew Whitaker on piano and Hammond B3 organ
- Marcos Robinson on guitar
- Karim Hutton on electric bass
- Isaiah Johnson on drums

Matthew Whitaker

Musician and composer Matthew Whitaker is a 19-year-old phenomenon in the world of jazz. Born with a condition that caused his blindness, Matthew Whitaker grew up in Hackensack, New Jersey, surrounded by music. His love for performing first became clear when he was only three years old, after his grandfather gave him a small Yamaha keyboard.

At age five, Whitaker was the youngest student at the Filomen M. D'Agostino Greenberg Music School in New York City, a school for the blind and visually impaired, where he studied classical piano and drums. At age nine, he taught himself how to play the Hammond B3 organ.

His musical talents were recognized early on as Whitaker won Amateur Night at the Apollo at age nine and became the youngest artist ever endorsed by the Hammond company for his skills. The following year, at age ten, he performed at Stevie Wonder's induction to the Apollo Legends Hall of Fame. He has since toured the world and performed at hundreds of major events and jazz festivals, appeared on shows including *The Today Show*, *Ellen*, and *CBS Sunday Morning*, and won numerous awards.

Illuminating the Art: Layered Listening

Listen for the loudest and softest and find the layers of sounds.

Listen for silence - listen for the spaces between sounds.

Listen for patterns of tension and release in music.

Listen for emotion: tragedy, sadness, gloom, jubilation.

- From *How to Think Like Leonardo DaVinci* by Brian Gelb



Image Credit: Vanessa Brantley Newton

We don't just listen to music, we watch it. Our heartbeat sometimes pounds with its rhythms, our energy matches the movement of the music. It is a layered experience, using different senses. Listening to music isn't a single-step process. If you focus your eyes and ears on the different instruments, the melodies, dynamics (loud/soft), tempo (slow/fast), texture (thick or thin layers of music), rhythms, harmonies, and more, you'll be engaging in layered listening and hear things in the music that may surprise and delight you.

What do we mean by "layered listening" when we talk about listening to music?

Hearing music invites us to respond on many levels: our bodies may move with energy, or our moods and emotions may respond, or we imagine different scenes and ideas in our minds while we listen. This kind of listening is usually casual and happens in a moment, passing by a moment later and maybe leaving a light echo of something felt, something experienced that comes back to us after time has passed. "Layered listening" is a way of paying attention to all the ways the artists are playing the music, as individuals, in groups, as an entire ensemble, and inviting ourselves INTO the music in a different way.

We talk about "paying attention" deliberately, because paying attention is like paying money for something we value. If we pay with our attention, we earn something back: a listening experience that opens up a new way of finding something valuable in music. This deeper paying attention – what we are calling "layered listening" – rewards the listener in surprising ways. While sometimes the music will still wash over us and slide away, layered listening can help keep us tuned into the choices and intentions of the artists in a way that allows us to find something new and powerful in the music. We get into the artistic process and appreciate what the artists are doing in a new way. We have a chance to find something new and different that can change the way we think about music and ourselves.

It takes practice to pay attention to each of the layers you can hear in a piece of jazz performance, and a little practice as well to give your listening a softer focus to hear all of the layers together. You can sharpen your hearing to listen for individual instruments, melodies, harmonies, rhythms, musical texture, improvisation, performance energy, etc. as separate parts, or soften your listening to hear all of it working together. When you can do both together you discover a richness and complexity that isn't obvious through casual hearing.

By this time, you might be thinking, “How can I listen to all those things at the same time?” It’s easy to hear them - it’s harder to focus your listening (and your eyes, and your energy) in such a way that all those layers come through to you. This is what the jazz musicians do for every single performance of every song - listening both to their own instruments and to all the layers in the music that everyone is playing. They have to pass the listening energy around the stage and they have to be ready to receive energy from the other musicians and from the audience.

Layered listening takes practice and skill. It’s part of every musician’s artistic toolbox. And we as audience can use this skill to get more out of every music experience, including the performance of the Matthew Whitaker Quartet.

About the Instruments

Piano (includes electric keyboard)

A stringed keyboard instrument and a member of the percussion family. Inside the piano are many wire strings. Musical notes are made when the felt hammers attached to the keys hit these piano strings, which is why it is considered a percussion instrument. There are 88 keys on a modern piano, and each one is a different note. The piano can play groups of notes called chords, which blend with the low notes played by the bass and the steady rhythms made by the drums to produce the rhythm section sound. Originally called pianoforte, because it could play both soft (piano in Italian) and loud (forte.)



Matthew Whitaker also plays the **electric organ** (specifically the Hammond B3 organ.) Electronic organs are designed to imitate the function and sound of pipe organs, large musical instruments with rows of tuned pipes through which sounds are made by compressed air. Organs are played using one or more keyboards to produce a wide range of musical effects.

Guitar

A stringed instrument with a long neck and a flat, hollow body. Its strings are plucked or strummed with the fingers or by using a pick. The guitar also plays chords and is featured in some jazz groups, where sometimes it is the only chord-making instrument.



Acoustic Guitar



Electric Guitar

Electric bass

Also called a bass guitar or simply bass, the electric bass is similar in appearance and construction to an electric guitar, but with a longer neck and scale length, and four, five, or six strings. It produces lower tones than the electric guitar and is used to play low musical sounds called “bass lines”.



Percussion (Drums, tambourines, wood blocks, triangles, and other instruments.)

Percussion means “to hit things together”, even your hands become a percussion instrument when you clap. A **drum** is a percussion instrument consisting of a hollow cylinder with a skin stretched tightly over one or both ends. The skin is hit with drumsticks or with the hands. The grouping of drums and cymbals used in a jazz group are called a trap set or “kit”. Drums help keep the tempo (the rate or speed of a musical piece) steady.



Fundamentals of Jazz

Melody is the part of the song that you hum along to. It is a succession of notes that form a complete musical statement.

Harmony is the foundation of the melody. In contrast to the melody, which is usually played one note at a time, the harmonies of a song consist of several notes (called chords) played simultaneously. Played in time (according to the prescribed rhythmic meter), these harmonies provide musicians with a road map for improvisation.

The harmonies of a piece of music help to create the mood. When you describe a song as dark and mysterious, or bright and happy you are often responding to the harmonies. In a typical jazz band, the harmonies are played by the piano or guitar, and bass. In a large ensemble or big band the harmonies are also played by orchestrated horns.

Rhythm is one of the identifying characteristics of jazz. In jazz, a rhythm grows out of a simple, steady beat like that of a heartbeat. This pulse creates the foundation for the music, often remains constant and is usually maintained by the bass and drums, which “keep time” for the rest of the band. Sometimes a pulse is very slow (like in a ballad) and sometimes it is very fast (like in a bebop tune.) No matter the speed (or tempo) this pulse helps to anchor the music and provides a basic contrast for other, more interesting rhythms present in the tune.

In some musical styles, the beat is subdivided into two equal parts. But in jazz, the beat is divided unevenly in a bouncy style, that implies three, rather than two, subunits. Much of the energy in jazz lies in this irregularity of its rhythm and the deliberately unexpected accents. This is known as syncopation.

Improvisation is the spontaneous creation of music. When a musician improvises, he or she invents music in that moment of performance, building on the existing theme and structure of the song. Jazz generally consists of a combination of composed and improvised elements, with performers choosing when and how much improvisation to include.

In a jazz performance, the ensemble plays a chorus or succession of choruses during which an individual player has the opportunity to improvise. In collective improvisation, two or more members of a group improvise at the same time. Improvisation, both collective and otherwise, builds a relationship between the members of the ensemble, helping them to “talk” to one another through their instruments. It allows musicians to be creative and share their personalities. By experimenting and developing individual styles of improvisation, musicians are able to challenge and redefine conventional standards of musical skill.



Painting by Ken Daley

Blues has many definitions; it is a type of music, as musical form, a harmonic language, an attitude towards playing music, and a collection of sounds. Mostly though, the blues is a feeling; whether happy, sad, or somewhere in between, its intention is always the same: to make you feel better, not worse, to cheer you up, not bring you down.

Born out of the religious, work, and social music of African Americans in the South during the late 1800s, the blues has since become the foundation of American popular music, including rhythm and blues, rock and roll, country, and all periods and styles of jazz.

Swing is the basic rhythmic attitude of jazz. It is so important to the music that if a band can't swing then it simply can't play jazz well. In the words of the famous jazz composer and musician Duke Ellington, “It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing.” Swing depends on strong coordination between the musicians and the style and energy with which they play. It propels the rhythm forward in a dynamic, finger-snapping way. Rhythm alone does not produce swing – it involves timbre (the characteristic quality of sound), attack (the way in which a note is performed), vibrato (a pulsating effect), and intonation (the pattern or melody of pitch changes.) The easiest way to recognize a swing feel is to listen to the drummer – try to hear the “ting-ting-ta-ting” of the cymbal.

Swing also refers to a specific jazz style that evolved in the mid-1930s, known as the Swing Era, which is characterized by large ensembles that play complex arrangements meant for dancing.

Syncopation is the rhythmic equivalent of surprise. It is the shifting of emphasis from what we hear as strong beats to weak, in other words, accenting unexpected beats. It is essential to a strong swing feeling.

Engagement Activities

Engagement Activity #1 (Pre-performance)

LISTENING & NOTICING: Deeply focusing on music



Overview

Time needed: 20-30 minutes (can be extended with layers of exploration).

Students will listen closely to a piece of music, examining the layers within a song, and how musical choices evoke certain emotions and moods.

Guiding Questions

What layers can we identify within a piece of music when we listen closely?

What tools do musicians use to evoke a mood or emotion?

How does each instrument contribute to the whole musical piece?

Artistic Tool Box

Close listening. Melody. Harmony. Rhythm. Improvisation.
Dynamics. Tempo. Pitch.

Supplies and Prep

- Computer and internet access to watch and listen to a Matthew Whitaker Quartet piece
- Writing materials (journal, paper, writing implements)

Instructions

Listening is an essential part of the process of creating and appreciating music. On one level, “listening” seems simple, we just have to notice and pay attention to what we are hearing. But it’s not always easy – it takes focus and concentration. But the more deeply we listen, the more we can hear the many layered elements in a musical piece. Musicians also listen closely when they perform together, and when they improvise, as jazz musicians do, the listening becomes even more focused.

Step 1 **Watch and listen** to a piece by the Matthew Whitaker Quartet. (Videos available at: <https://www.matthewwhitaker.net/video>.)

Step 2 **Notice** the different instruments, and listen for the different sound qualities of each of the instruments. Find the pulse and listen for other rhythms.

Step 3 **Identify layers** in the piece:

- **Melody:**
 - What is the main melody?
 - Does the melody change?
 - Who/which instrument(s) play the melody?
- **Harmony:**
 - What is/are the harmonies?
 - Do the harmonies change?
 - Who/which instrument(s) play the harmonies?
- **Rhythm:**
 - What are the rhythms you hear? (Try to tap them out using your hands.)
 - Do these rhythms change?
 - Who/which instrument(s) play the rhythms? Do they ever switch roles with each other?

Step 4 **Listen** to the piece again, this time for the mood of the piece. How does it make you feel? Are the musicians trying to express something tender, fierce, funny, or sad?

- How are the musicians playing their instruments that might make us feel this way? For example:
 - Are they playing loudly to energize the audience, or softly, to calm us? (In music, the variation in loudness between notes or phrases is called the **dynamics** of a piece.)
 - Are they playing quickly or slowly? (**Tempo** is the speed at which a piece of music is played.) How does that affect how the music makes us feel?
 - How high or low do the notes sound? (Called **pitch** in music.) How do the different pitches make you feel?
 - What are the different “colors” or qualities of each instrument? When these qualities come together do they produce a certain effect or feeling?
- Can you recognize any improvised sections?
- Which instruments do you hear playing a solo (when one musician plays)? When do you hear a duet (two musicians playing)?
- When all the musicians are playing at the same time is there a “call and response?” (When someone plays something and the others repeat it back.) In what other ways are the musicians having a musical “conversation”? Are they harmonizing, playing in unison (playing the same notes simultaneously), or improvising together?

Step 5 **Write down** your impressions from your listening experience. Then, **share** these impressions with each other.

- **Discuss:**

- What did you hear in the music? What stood out to you?
- How did the music make you feel? How did the musicians play to make you feel that way?
- How did the musicians have a musical “conversation” together?
- What happened when the musicians improvised?

Engagement Activity #2 (Pre-performance)

INSTRUMENT MAPPING: Identifying the instruments

Overview

Time needed: 30-60 minutes (can be extended with layers of exploration).

Through visual mapping and notation, students will identify each musical instrument’s role, the quality each instrument brings to a musical piece, and the relationships of the instruments to one another.



Guiding Questions

How can we identify the qualities of different musical instruments?

What is the relationship between musical instruments in a jazz quartet?

How can a visual representation of a piece of music inform our understanding of it?

Artistic Tool Box

Close listening.
images.

Interpreting qualities of sounds.
Mapping music.

Translating sounds to visual

Graphic notation.

Supplies and Prep

- Computer and internet to watch and listen to a Matthew Whitaker Quartet piece
- Colored markers
- Large piece of drawing paper
- Writing materials (journal, paper, writing implements)

Instructions

Now that we've listened closely to the piece, we're going to take a closer look at the role each instrument plays, and how the instruments work together.

- Step 1** **Watch** and listen to a video of the Matthew Whitaker Quartet, perhaps the same piece you just listened to. (Videos at: <https://www.matthewwhitaker.net/video.>)
- Step 2** **Identify** each of the instruments. What is each instrument's role? When does each instrument carry the melody, when does it provide rhythms, harmonies?
- Step 3** **Watch and listen** to the piece again (or a section of the piece) but this time get a large piece of paper and several colored markers.
- Focus on just one of the instruments, like the piano, guitar, or drums.
 - Choose one colored marker to represent that instrument. What's the quality of this instrument? Is it smooth, and fluid, suggesting curving lines and circles? Or is it more jaggedly, with sharp angles and hard edges? Decide on how you'll notate this instrument's movement through the piece, and chart or graph it's progress as you listen.
- Step 4** **Take a different colored marker.** You'll hear the song (or the same section) again.
- This time choose to listen to a new instrument. Using the same piece of paper map this instrument's progress.
 - Again, respond to the quality of this instrument as you make your notations. Perhaps instead of lines, this instrument suggests dots, dashes or brushstrokes? Maybe a shape or abstract design comes up on your page.
 - Don't think too much, let the marker in your hand "drive" for the moment.
 - Play the song (or song portion) two more times, choosing to follow a different instrument (and different colored marker) with new graphing notations suggested by this instrument's quality.
- Step 5** **Look at your sheet.** It probably looks like a work of art!
- Write your impressions:
 - What jumps out at you from your map? Does your map accurately reflect what you heard from the instruments?
 - Contrast and compare the instruments' notations. Which notation grabs your attention the most? Which one is the most quiet or mellow?
 - How do the instruments' notations interact with each other? Are there sections where they stay separate, and others where they're all mixed in together?
 - Share your instrument maps or graphs, and discuss what you heard, noticed and discovered during the activity.

Optional: Create your own art work inspired by jazz! See examples of visual art inspired by jazz music: <https://www.classicdriver.com/en/article/art/i-got-rhythm-how-jazz-music-inspired-art>

Engagement Activity #3 (Post-Performance)

REFLECTION: LISTENING AND OBSERVING

Overview

Time needed: 20-30 minutes (can be extended with layers of exploration.)

Students will reflect on the performance of the Matthew Whitaker Quartet through individual reflection and group discussion to understand how artists' choices influence our experience of a performance.



Guiding Questions

How does separating what our eyes and ears experience in a performance from our interpretations and feelings about that performance help us to see how artists' choices evoke a specific response?

What are the different musical styles heard in this performance of the Matthew Whitaker Quartet?

How do the musicians work together during a performance?

Artistic Literacy Tool Box

Attentive observing. Categorizing aural and visual information. Listening and responding.
Musical genres or styles.

Supplies and Prep

- Writing materials for students (journal, paper, writing implements)

Instructions





Step 1 **Think back** to the performance of the Matthew Whitaker Quartet and jot or sketch some of your memories of the concert.

- What were the different styles of songs you heard?
- How did the musicians and their instruments work together?
- What stood out, or was most memorable to you?

Step 2 **What did you See and Hear?**

In order to understand more about the composers' work, and the choices made by the musicians (and even those of the videographer who filmed and edited the concert) it helps to understand the actual elements of the performance, not what we may be interpreting or projecting that we heard or saw using our imaginations.

- Before you jump into sharing your impressions of the performance, try to remember what you actually saw on the stage. (Not what was in your imagination or “mind’s eye”, but what visual information your eyes took in.)
- Share with others the images and elements you saw in the performance.
- Now, think back to what you actually heard. (Again, not the impression the music made on you, but the sounds your ears actually took in.)
- Share with others the sounds and music you heard in the concert.

SEE 	HEAR 
THINK 	FEEL 

Step 3

What did you Think and Feel?

Now let’s talk about how the choices of what music to include and what to show visually, brought up certain thoughts and feelings for you.

- What do you remember thinking during the performance?
- What did you wonder about? What other impressions or even stories came to mind when you were watching?
- And how did you feel as you watched the performance? What emotions came up as you heard the songs and saw the musicians perform together?

Step 4

Discuss:

- Describe the relationships between the musicians (and between the instruments.) How did they lead during some songs or sections, and support during others? How did they “cue” or prompt each other as they performed?
- What did you notice about your listening during the performance? Were there moments when you listened more attentively? If so, why?
- What surprised you about the performance? Did you have an expectation going in that changed as you experienced the show?

Suggestion for Teachers: Share your screen and capture what your students saw, heard, thought, and felt.

You might consider seeking curricular connections in history, science, or literature. If you design a lesson that you’d like to share, please let us know! We’d like to include it on our blog or in future workshops for teachers...



Resources

Matthew Whitaker web site:

<https://www.matthewwhitaker.net/>

Videos of Matthew Whitaker in performance:

<https://www.matthewwhitaker.net/video>

Artist Conversation with Matthew Whitaker:

<https://calperformances.org/related-events/pre-concert-conversation-with-matthew-whitaker/>



The Art of the Spark: Musical Creativity Explored with Dr. Charles Limb:

<https://calperformances.org/related-events/public-forum-matthew-whitaker/>

In this 90-minute video from the Kennedy Center, UCSF Professor of Otolaryngology Dr. Charles Limb shows how encouraging and developing musical improvisational skills in children has led to a better understanding of how creativity is implemented in the human brain.

Online Resources

Jazz for Young People Resources: <https://academy.jazz.org/jfyp/let-freedom-swing-resources/>

NEA Jazz in the Schools: <https://www.jazzstudiesonline.org/outside-resource/nea-jazz-schools>

PBS Jazz, A Film by Ken Burns: <https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/jazz/>

NPR's Jazz Profiles: <https://www.npr.org/series/10208861/npr-s-jazz-profiles>

Books

- *The History of Jazz*, by Ted Gioia
- *The Story of Jazz*, by Marshall and Jean Stearns
- *Jazz: A History of America's Music*, by Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns
- *The Jazz Tradition*, by Martin Williams

Children's Books

- *The Sound that Jazz Makes*, by Carol Buston and Eric Velasquez
- *The First Book of Jazz*, By Langston Hughes
- *I see the Rhythm*, by Michele Wood



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For information on supporting our Artistic Literacy (Education & Community) Programs, contact Taun Miller Wright:
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