

Students will use the U.S. Army Band “Pershing’s Own” recording of Kimberly Archer’s *Common Threads* to become “music detectives,” investigating how the piece weaves musical ideas together. Using colored yarn on an “investigation board,” they will visually map out the common threads — recurring motives, rhythms, instruments, and timbres — that unify the composition. Then, they will map out their own ideas on individual investigation boards for an imagined new piece of music. This lesson may be carried out during a single long class period or segmented over 2-3 days.



SETTING

General Music (Grades 5-6+, middle school)

AREA OF FOCUS

Thematic Development — understanding how artists create unity in a piece through repetition, variation, and recurring motives.

NATIONAL STANDARDS ADDRESSED

Responding

Anchor Standard #7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard #8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Connecting

Anchor Standard #10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Creating

Anchor Standard #1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

PRIOR UNDERSTANDING NECESSARY

Students should have prior experience with basic elements of music, including melody, rhythm, tempo, and instrumentation. They should be familiar with listening for and describing patterns or repeated musical ideas using simple musical vocabulary (e.g., high/low, fast/slow, same/different). Some experience reading music notation will give students extra context during the lesson.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Knowledge/Skill

Students will **identify** recurring musical motives, themes, and patterns through active listening using appropriate vocabulary for musical elements such as melody, rhythm, tempo, and instrumentation.

Students will **analyze** how these elements create unity and variation within a composition.

Students will **record** and organize musical observations using a structured “case file” format and “investigation board” metaphor.

Contextual Understanding

Students will **demonstrate** how Kimberly Archer’s Common Threads reflects compositional techniques that connect to broader artistic traditions of thematic development and variation.

Students will **relate** their listening experience to the concept of musical storytelling — how recurring ideas help a piece feel complete and cohesive.

Artistic Expression

Students will create their own musical “investigation boards” for an imagined new piece of music (this objective may be optionally built upon in future lessons).

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Projector screen and sound system
- Whiteboard (or large chart paper) and markers
- Army Band recording: <https://youtu.be/wSSmtrD6CZk>
- Multiple different colors of yarn or thread
- Scissors to cut thread
- Push-pins/tape to attach thread to board
- Pencils
- Sticky Notes
- Print-outs of included detective “case file” sheet: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1L6MTyB2ZrQM7CQN9fE83vgAliN-ZeHurm5LFI0nAo8M/edit?usp=sharing>



PROCEDURES

PART I: The Crime Scene

1. Introduce the composer, Kimberly Archer, and the piece.

“Kimberly K. Archer is a living composer specializing in music for winds and percussion. She currently lives in Illinois where she works as Distinguished Research Professor of Music Composition at Southern Illinois University. She teaches composition, orchestration, analysis, counterpoint, and music theory, alongside writing music for groups performing all over the country. She wrote Common Threads in 2016 for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Wind Ensemble.”

She writes:

“... nothing shuts off my creativity faster than the word "commission." It can be so much pressure! After many false starts, I found myself sitting at a piano, banging repeatedly on an F and growling to myself, ‘If I play this F long enough, something has to come out of it!’ What ultimately came out was a work that meanders through many keys, meters, and styles, but is unified by the common thread of a repeated pitch. Usually it's that F, finally making good on its potential. As the larger form and character of this music began to take shape, I realized its goofy humor, carefree spirit, and unabashed joy exactly reflected what I have seen for myself and love so much about the UN-L Wind Ensemble and their conductor, both in rehearsal and performance. Indeed, I can't recall a premiere performance where the musicians and the audience shared such fun and energy!”

2. Choose two contrasting excerpts of Common Threads suited to your students' listening level. Make sure the timecode from the recording is clearly visible while students listen.
3. On the whiteboard draw a large “investigation board” layout: key suspects (musical elements) around the edges, blank center labeled “MAIN THREAD.”
4. Assign colored yarns: e.g., red string = melody/motive, blue string = rhythm/tempo, green string = instrumentation/timbre, yellow string = dynamics / style
5. Provide students with a brief case background: “A new piece of music has arrived. Your mission, detectives, is to uncover the ‘common threads’ – the musical clues that link sections together and show how the composer built unity from many parts. Our job is to connect all the threads to a single MAIN THREAD that brings the whole piece together.”

PART II: First Excerpt - Detectives at Work

6. Play the first excerpt of Common Threads.
7. Students use the “case file” sheet to note 2-3 clues. Encourage using musical vocabulary.
8. After listening, in pairs they share their clues and pick one to bring to the board.
9. Invite pairs to the board, one pair at a time: they tape their clue (written on a sticky note) to the board under the appropriate category (motive, rhythm, etc.). Then they use the corresponding color yarn to connect that clue to the “MAIN THREAD” or to another clue already placed.
10. As each pair connects, ask the class: “Why did you choose to connect this clue here? What evidence from the music supports it?”

PART III: Second Excerpt - Drawing Connections

11. Play a contrasting excerpt from the piece (e.g., a different key/meter or mood).
12. Students again note clues, focusing on how this section differs and yet how it might link back to the main thread.
13. Pairs discuss and decide which clue to bring forward.
14. Pairs place their new clues and yarn connections on the board, visibly weaving a network of clues that show how the composer ties the piece together.

PART IV: Solving the Crime

15. Facilitate class discussion:
 - Which clues helped you see variation vs repetition?
 - How does the music continue to change and yet still connect to a bigger picture?
 - What musical idea seems to “tie everything together”? (In her program notes Archer mentions a repeated pitch F in the piece being a unifying element).
16. On their case file sheet students write a short summary: “What is the MAIN THREAD in this piece?” Ask them to defend their answers: “How did the clues you uncovered bring you to this conclusion?” Guide students to the “MAIN THREAD” with leading questions. While this may be open-ended, this activity will be most successful if the teacher hints at the “MAIN THREAD” being something easily identifiable — like the repeated F eighth note line or shifting meter.
17. Ask for 2-3 volunteer detectives to explain their findings. Collect student case file sheets.

PART V: A New Case

18. Pass out large poster boards or construction paper sheets to students, along with strands of thread and tape.
19. Have students create their own individual “crime scene” for either an imagined piece of new music or one of their favorite pop songs, drawing connections between different elements of the music similar to the Common Threads activity. Encourage students to use the same system for thread colors and musical vocabulary, all connecting to a single “MAIN THREAD” of the song.
20. Move around the room and guide students as they work on their posters. If necessary, write some ideas for a “MAIN THREAD” on the board for an imagined new song or existing commonly-known pop songs.
21. Have a few volunteer students showcase their poster boards. Collect boards as students exit and display them around the room for future classes.
22. OPTIONAL: in a future lesson, have students experiment with improvising in groups on classroom instruments following the song structure of their poster boards, emphasizing the importance of the music’s “MAIN THREAD.”

DIFFERENTIATION

- For advanced students: Provide score excerpts for the listening portions and ask them to mark timecodes where they hear the themes occur.
- For students needing support: provide a guided clue list or work with them one-on-one to fill out their case files as their peers work in pairs.

ASSESSMENT

Informal

Teacher will provide guiding questions during the “investigation board” activity, checking for student understanding of musical vocabulary.

Formal

Teacher will review student case file sheets, looking for use of musical vocabulary and coherent explanation of how the piece is unified.

Informal

Teacher will observe students as they work on their individual posters, checking for comprehension and correct use of musical vocabulary.

Formal

Teacher will review creative integrity of student poster boards, checking for comprehension of thematic development and variation in their own art.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Play the recording at a comfortable volume; remind students to listen for big changes (tempo, key, instrument) and small changes (motive variation).
- Encourage students to think like detectives: “What changed? What stayed the same?”
- Make the visual board lively: let students place yarn somewhat freely so the “web” of connections is visible — this reinforces the metaphor of many threads weaving together.
- If technology allows, project a timeline of the piece while listening so students know when a section begins/ends (helps pinpoint clues).
- Emphasize collaboration: pairs help each other refine their interpretations before connecting to the board.

**SSG Alex Tedrow is a Staff Arranger at The U.S. Army Band “Pershing’s Own.” He frequently works as a composer and clinician of early educational music. He holds dual master’s degrees in Music Education and Composition from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music.*

Band Together 2025: Common Threads