

# LESSON PLAN:

## MEET WITNESS GUEST ARTIST, MELANIE DEMORE

- **PART 1: MEET MELANIE**
- **PART 2: LISTENING AND RESPONDING TO MELANIE'S VOICE**

### INTRODUCTION

In this two-part lesson, students will first learn about singer, composer, and vocal activist Melanie DeMore, view the “Meet Melanie DeMore” PowerPoint, read a short biography and reviews of her vocal performances, and complete a biographical portrait of her life. Then, students will make predictions about her vocal style, and listen to her music on select recordings. They will discuss details from her life story that are significant and/or of interest to them and write a personal response to the sound and character of her voice using descriptive and figurative language. These two parts can be done back to back, or over the course of a few days.

### PART 1: MEET MELANIE

#### PROCESS

1. View the “Meet Melanie DeMore” PowerPoint available in the WITNESS Online Classroom Resource Hub. Use the script provided to guide you through the slides. Teachers or students may narrate from the script.
2. Divide students into small groups to read the short biographical article, “Meet Melanie DeMore” (one copy per group, or per student). Direct them to read out loud and share the reader’s role within their group.
  - Remaining in groups, students then discuss what they’ve learned about the artist, highlighting some of the events, experiences, and details of Melanie DeMore’s life that they find interesting or significant.
  - Encourage note taking as they share information and comments on her background, interesting and important events and circumstances that led to her life in music, her inspirations, and her goals as an artist.)
3. Provide each student a copy of the “Create a Portrait of Melanie DeMore” biographical worksheet for each student to complete. They can work in their group or as individuals. You may also make it a homework assignment.

#### EXTENSION ACTIVITY USING VISUAL ARTS

Students can work together, using their biographical portraits of Melanie to create a classroom collage on a bulletin board or poster board, using craft materials, art supplies, construction paper, etc. as well as photos or illustrations of Melanie. **Send a photo of your collages to [robert@vocalessence.org](mailto:robert@vocalessence.org) to be shared with Melanie!**

### LEARNING GOALS

In Part 1, students will use resources to gather facts about the artist and her musical life, how she became interested in the musical traditions of the Gullah people, and use them to complete a biographical portrait. In Part 2, students will predict what she will sound like after reading comments of critics and others, and finally hear her voice and describe it in their own words. Students may demonstrate their ability to appropriately apply both musical terms and figures of speech such as metaphors and similes when they predict and write their description.

### PART 1 MATERIALS

- Copies of the biographical article, “Meet Melanie DeMore”
- “Meet Melanie DeMore” PowerPoint from the WITNESS Online Classroom Resource Hub
- Script for PowerPoint
- Copies of the “Create a Portrait of Melanie DeMore” biographical worksheet

### PART 2 MATERIALS

- Recordings of Melanie from the WITNESS Online Classroom Resource Hub: “Swing Low”, “Standing Stone”, and “Sending you Light”
- Copies of the **Predict → Listen → Respond → Describe → Write** graphic organizer

## QUOTES

*“When she turns her direct gaze to the audience, it feels like she was born to bring a powerful message through her songs. The combination of her gentle spirit and her deep resounding voice stopped me in my tracks.”*

—**Barbara Price, Producer**

*“Mel’s voice is low and smooth as chocolate.”*

—**Sadie** (web review)

*“When she comes your way, her energy will charge the very air you breathe like a meteor shower, so get ready to rise up!”*

—**Sonja Heller**

*“Melanie DeMore’s singing is thrilling. This is not a voice that comes along every day. This is WOMAN POWER WRAPPED IN VELVET.”*

—**Ronnie Gilbert**

## PART 2: LISTENING AND RESPONDING TO MELANIE’S VOICE

Tell students that when audiences first hear DeMore sing, they are fully captured by her voice. This lesson will help place the sound of her voice in students’ “inner ears” before the WITNESS Young People’s Concert.

### PROCESS

1. Read the quotes in the sidebar from musicians and music critics about their thoughts and responses. Point out that they are personal opinions written by musicians, arts writers, and critics taken from blogs and print media. Pause after each and ask students to interpret the quote by paraphrasing what they think the author was communicating. Focus on the figurative language, the similes and metaphors in the quotes, and read them out loud again. What do they mean when applied to a singing voice?
2. Distribute the **Predict → Listen → Respond → Describe → Write** graphic organizer, a step-by-step process for documenting their thoughts, reactions and descriptions. As they work through the organizer, students will **imagine** and **predict** what Melanie’s voice will sound like, **listen** to the recording, and finally, **describe** her voice in their own words using descriptive language. This activity can be an individual or a group process.
  - Review the quotes and **write** the similes and metaphors in the first box.
  - **Write** a short prediction of how you think her voice will sound based on what you know about the artist, the descriptive language in the quotes, and personal experiences with singing and singers, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> box of the organizer. Share it with another student.
  - **Listen** to the recording and determine how reality fit your prediction. How close did you come?
3. Play a recording of Melanie singing using one of the following tracks, accessible on the WITNESS Online Classroom Resource Hub: “Swing Low”, “Standing Stone”, or “Sending you Light”. Students will listen and write responses to **describe** Melanie’s voice. Take time to **compare** the predictions to what they *actually heard*. Were they on target? Close? Was anyone surprised by the sound, and what surprised them? Jot descriptions in the third section of the worksheet.
  - Compare two different recordings. Direct pairs of students to describe what they heard and make comparisons between the two songs. They can practice how it feels to talk about timbre, pitch, dynamics, tempo, and vocal qualities. Encourage the use of many similes and metaphors.
4. Finally, ask each student to imagine they are writers for a music blog or a newspaper arts and music section. Using what they heard, their descriptions, and newly created similes and metaphors, students will write a quotable description of Melanie DeMore’s voice in the last section of the worksheet

## RESOURCES

- <http://www.melaniemore.com/>  
The artist's website provides videos, photos, and stories about the artist (retrieved 8/8/23)
- <https://youtu.be/mQlg-UomM8k>  
A profile of Melanie DeMore and her work with the traditional Gullah art of stick pounding on YouTube video (retrieved 8/8/23)
- <https://youtu.be/G8At6uxrWas>  
BMA Backstage spotlight of vocal activist and educator Melanie DeMore speaking on the Gullah people, culture, communication and art. Filmed at BMA Networks WCCO studios in Minneapolis (retrieved 8/8/23)
- <https://youtu.be/GoD98a4qtKI>  
A mesmerizing performance, DeMore's interpretation of "Swing Low" (retrieved 8/8/23)
- <https://youtu.be/GXlgRS2soWs>  
A recording of Melanie singing her rendition of "Swing Low", studio recording from album In the Mother House (2012) (retrieved 8/8/23)
- <https://youtu.be/YminLnyYU5w>  
VocalEssence performance of "Standing Stone" from 2014 VocalEssence WITNESS Concert, Orchestra Hall (retrieved 8/8/23)
- <https://youtu.be/wpMW8-Nx4T0>  
Melanie DeMore working with MUSE Choirs, teaching the song "Standing Stone", its melody and harmony parts (retrieved 8/8/23)
- [https://youtu.be/wSNQFstyu\\_s](https://youtu.be/wSNQFstyu_s)  
Recording of Melanie singing "Sending You Light" with background singers, from album In the Mother House (2012) (retrieved 8/8/23)
- <https://youtu.be/clzZuoNFtXg>  
Live performance of Melanie singing "Sending You Light" with pianist Julie Wolf (retrieved 8/8/23)

## GLOSSARY

### **Figurative Language:**

Words used by writers to produce images in readers' minds and to express ideas in fresh, vivid, and imaginative ways. Includes similes and metaphors.

**Similes:** Words used to compare two things that are alike in one way. Similes use the words "like" or "as" in the comparison.

**Metaphor:** Words or phrases ordinarily used for one thing, but applied to another in order to give a rich, clear description. The words "like" or "as" are not used in metaphors, one thing appears to be the other.

## MINNESOTA STATE STANDARDS CONNECTIONS

### ARTS: MUSIC

#### Artistic Process: Respond

*Standard 7:* Analyze and construct interpretations of artistic work.

*Benchmark 1:* Identify and describe elements that create contrasting performances of the same musical selection.

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS: LITERACY

#### Reading: Key Ideas and Details

*Standard 1:* Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions.

#### Writing: Production and Distribution of Writing

*Standard 4:* Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

## ASSESSMENT SUGGESTIONS

Students' written descriptions on the graphic organizer provide evidence of musical thinking and their ability to describe a vocal performance using both musical vocabulary and figurative language.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Post and read reviews of local musical artists or groups and of concerts by artists booked in Twin Cities venues. Challenge students to pay attention to how reviewers use language, particularly similes and metaphors, to communicate their opinions.
- Look at a map of the U.S.A. and locate the various places DeMore has lived and worked.
- Students can select a singer whose voice they like, listen to a recording of a specific song, then write a review describing the artist's voice and musical style.

## FIGURES OF SPEECH – SIMILES & METAPHORS

A **simile** compares two things that are alike in one way. To help you identify a simile, know that the words “like” or “as” are always used.

A **metaphor** is a word or a phrase ordinarily used for one thing, applied to another in order to give a rich, clear description. It does not use the words “like” or “as.” but states that one thing appears to be the other.

**NOTE:** Two terms, “figure of speech” and “figurative language,” might be used by students as they define the terms ‘simile’ and ‘metaphor.’ Figures of speech/figurative language are devices for expressing meaning or heightening the effect of words to help us make strong connections to the words. Metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, and alliteration are some of the categories of figurative language taught in Language Arts classes.

## SCRIPT FROM THE MELANIE DEMORE POWERPOINT

Teachers can narrate or ask students to read from the slides.

TITLE	MEET MELANIE DEMORE, 2024 WITNESS GUEST ARTIST
#2	She was born in the Bronx, a borough of New York City, and grew up with music. Her parents were gifted singers who passed a deep love of music down to all of their five children.
#3	Melanie began piano lesson at five, and in middle school she played flute and guitar. Every Christmas for 14 years, she received a new instrument from her parents. She particularly remembers a mandolin, a jaw harp, and a recorder among the 14 instruments. Some were instruments she'd never seen before. Her job was to figure out how to play it.
#4	From New York, her family moved to Anchorage, Alaska — near the beautiful snow covered mountains.
#5	Her parents were fine singers and actors. In Anchorage, they sang in the Opera Chorus during the 1960s. The chorus sang for guest artists too. One famous artist Melanie remembers was Marian Anderson. Melanie's mom would often take her to rehearsals. She heard all kinds of good music during those rehearsals. When her mom gave her a Simon and Garfunkel record it opened her ears to other musical styles.
#6	Next it was on to San Antonio, Texas, where Melanie finished her education. You may have guessed that Melanie's father was in the military. Military families move many times as parents are stationed in new places.
#7	At Robert G. Cole High School in Texas, she was the student president of the Marching Band. In college in San Antonio, Texas, Melanie played in the orchestra and earned a music degree in piano, flute, and music history. <b>BUT NOBODY IN COLLEGE EVER HEARD HER SING!</b>
#8	At different times in her life Melanie has been a nun, a forklift operator for Sears, the head chef in an expensive Texas restaurant, an actor in residence at UT-Austin for black playwright, Cheryl Hawkins, a teaching artist, folk singer and healing singer to the very ill.
#9	Melanie's whole body approach to music came from the 18 years she sang with Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir. The group specializes in and preserves African-American roots music — music from the Gullah people of South Carolina and Georgia, and all kinds of old songs originally created by enslaved Africans. One of the group's founding members, Melanie, was the "sticker" — playing the pounding stick to carry a song's rhythm. Melanie's father's family is from South Carolina, so her connection to the Gullah art of stick pounding runs deep.
#10	In 2011, Melanie DeMore sang in the 10 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary Remembrance Concerts at Trinity Cathedral, New York City, in the shadow of Ground Zero.
#11	<i>New York Times</i> critic, James R. Oestreich, wrote: "That night in the big concert, the singer and songwriter Melanie DeMore led the audience in singing "Amazing Grace." You loved the communal spirit; you wished you could have heard more of a solo rendition from the soulful Ms. DeMore."
#12	She believes that when you sing, you know it deep inside, and you do it from the inside out. She works endlessly to help singers bring forth the music they have deep inside.



Melanie DeMore



With Pounding Sticks

## MEET MELANIE DEMORE!

Melanie DeMore was born in the Bronx, a borough of New York City. She is the oldest child in a family of five kids and two very musical parents. Both of her parents were singers. Her father's roots were in the South and her mother was a genuine New York City girl and the first African American musician offered a full scholarship to the prestigious Julliard School of Music in New York. Because she wanted to keep singing "her way" and not the conservatory way, she decided to decline the scholarship.

Music was hardwired into family life. The morning wake-up call came when her mom waltzed into their bedrooms loudly singing "wake up, my children!!!" All the siblings made music in some way. Melanie remembers some of the sweet musical chaos that occurred when she practiced piccolo in one room while her brother marched up and down the hallway rehearsing drum beats and patterns.

Growing up, Melanie heard her parents perform many times. Because her father was in the military, the family moved each time he was stationed to a new military base. One tour of duty took the family to Anchorage, Alaska. While in Anchorage, her parents started the first black theater company in Alaska. They also sang in the Anchorage Opera Chorus. Melanie remembers going to an opera rehearsal of *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan. Her mom had to point out her Dad onstage to Melanie, because she didn't recognize him due to his make-up and costume. Melanie heard the famous American contralto, Marian Anderson, and choral conductor Robert Shaw, because her parents took her to so many rehearsals.

With two professional singers as parents and music at the center of family life, it is no accident that Melanie followed a musical path. Piano lessons started when she was five, and flute, guitar and piccolo were added in middle school. Every Christmas for 14 years, she received a new instrument from her parents. She particularly remembers a mandolin, a jaw harp, and a recorder among the 14 instruments. Sometimes it was an instrument which she'd never seen before. Her job was to figure out how to play it.

Then there is her most amazing voice. It is very low — lower than Marian Anderson's famous contralto voice; as low as the famous African American bass, Paul Robeson. But since it is produced through a female's vocal mechanism, the timbre of Melanie's voice is incredibly mellow and velvety. In an interview, Melanie recalls a time during

childhood when she was paying attention and really heard her voice. She says that she didn't realize for a moment that it was coming from her own body. Some people describe it as possessing a magical ability to soothe crying babies and console the sick and dying; "resonant, mesmerizing, comforting, and downright jaw-dropping in its power and sensuality." She says her voice is "a miracle."

After Alaska, her family moved to San Antonio, Texas, where Melanie continued her education. At Robert G. Cole High School in Texas, she was the student president of the Marching Band and alto soloist in the choir. As a high school musician, her piccolo playing won a gold medal in a state competition. College came next, at Incarnate Word University in San Antonio, where she earned a music degree in piano, flute, and music history. But in college, **no one ever heard her sing!**

That changed when she signed on as one of the founding members of Linda Tillery's Cultural Heritage Choir, an ensemble that specializes in and preserves African-American roots music — music from the Gullah people of South Carolina and Georgia, and other slave song traditions. Melanie sang with them for 18 years, and was the "sticker" who played the pounding stick that carried the rhythm of a song beneath the layers of voices. Melanie's connection to the Gullah is deeply personal, as her father's family is originally from South Carolina. You can learn more about the Gullah people by reading the article, "Introduction to the Gullah People of South Carolina and Georgia".

At different times in her life Melanie was a nun, a forklift operator for Sears, the head chef in an expensive Texas restaurant, an actor in residence at UT-Austin for black playwright Cheryl Hawkins, a teaching artist, folk singer, and a healing singer to the very ill. Everywhere she settles and in all the cities she visits, Melanie DeMore shares her wisdom as a singer, songwriter and agent for kindness and harmony amongst people. This is true for her solo performances, music residencies in schools and with all kinds of choirs, in hospice centers, and when she forms an "instant choir." Her mission and gift is to take her special energy and the songs of tolerance, peace, and healing to all the people she meets along the way.



With the Oakland Children's Choir



With Linda Tillery and the Cultural

# CREATE A PORTRAIT OF MELANIE DEMORE

If you were to introduce Melanie DeMore to someone who knows nothing about her, what would you say about her life and accomplishments? Reflect on events, facts, and/or noteworthy details you've read or heard. Then summarize five that you think are the most interesting into a portrait of the artist.

(You can write inside *and* outside the circles.)

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# PREDICT → LISTEN → RESPOND → DESCRIBE → WRITE

## Graphic Organizer

*The sound of her voice is like warm melted butter. Her songwriting is steeped in the many styles of America's rich musical tapestry. This makes her a standout.* —**Linda Tillery**

*“When she turns her direct gaze to the audience, it feels like she was born to bring a powerful message through her songs. The combination of her gentle spirit and her deep resounding voice stopped me in my tracks.”*  
—**Barbara Price, Producer**

*“Melanie DeMore’s singing is thrilling. This is not a voice that comes along every day. This is WOMAN POWER WRAPPED IN VELVET.”* —**Ronnie Gilbert**

*“Mel’s voice is low and smooth as chocolate.”* —**Sadie** (web review)

1. **READ** the comments. Make a list of the figurative language used to describe Melanie’s voice & personality.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

2. **PREDICT** what you think her voice will sound like based on other’s comments.

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3. **LISTEN** to a recording and **DESCRIBE** what you actually hear in the space below.

Were any of your predictions on target? \_\_\_\_\_

4. **WRITE** a quotable description of Melanie’s voice from your point of view. Use one or more figures of speech (such as similes & metaphors and musical terminology) to make it interesting. If you loved it, what was it that you loved? If you were not so excited, find an interesting way to express your opinion. Use the back if you need more space.

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NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_