

Night on a Bare Mountain by Modest Mussorgsky

PRIMARY CLASSROOM LESSON PLAN

For:

- Key Stage 2 in England and Wales
- Second Level, P5-P7 in Scotland
- Key Stage 1/Key Stage 2 in Northern Ireland

Written by Rachel Leach

Background

The composer: Modest Mussorgsky (1839 - 1881)

- Russian composer.
- Part of a group called 'The Five' who wrote Russian sounding music using folk tunes and traditional stories
- Had difficulty finishing pieces, many (including this one) were finished by other composers after his death so he never knew how popular and beloved his music was

The music: Night on a Bare Mountain

- Written in 1867 and finished on the night of St John's Eve when legend says the witches' sabbath takes place!
- One of the first Russian 'tone poems' (i.e. a piece describing a story)
- Describes witches casting spells, dancing and partying until the sun comes up

Learning outcomes

Learners will:

- listen and reflect on a piece of orchestral music
- invent their own musical motifs and structure them into a piece
- perform as an ensemble
- learn musical language appropriate to the task

Curriculum checklist

- play and perform in ensemble contexts, using voices and playing musical instruments

- improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
- listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory

Glossary of music terms used

Accelerando	gradually getting faster
Glissando	A 'slide' between notes, i.e. when a beater is swiped over the notes of a xylophone. (The most famous glissandos are played by trombones)
Next-door notes	moving stepwise up and down without leaps or gaps between the pitches
Orchestrate	choose which instruments perform which parts of the music
Pitched percussion	percussion instruments that can play different pitches – xylophones, glockenspiels, chime bars etc.
Tempo	another word for speed
Unpitched percussion	percussion instruments that can only make a limited number of sounds – drums, shakers woodblocks, tambourine etc.

Resources required

- A large space
- Classroom percussion instruments and any other instruments that your children might be learning

This scheme of work is plotted out over six lessons. Feel free to adapt it to suit your children and the resources you have available.

The six lessons at a glance

Lesson 1:

Activities: Listen and describe a piece of music
Watch the orchestral performance and discuss
Create a movement piece inspired by the music

Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Appreciate and understand a wide range of high-quality live and recorded music drawn from different traditions and from great composers and musicians

Lesson 2:

Activities: Use Mussorgsky's musical motifs to create an introduction

Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

Lesson 3:

Activities: Learn Mussorgsky's melody
Create lyrics and sing them

Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory

Lesson 4:

Activities: Use Mussorgsky's musical motifs to create a dance piece

Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

Lesson 5:

Activities: Use Mussorgsky's musical motifs to create a piece to describe dawn
Use technical terminology

Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music
Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

Lesson 6:

Activities: Structure ideas to create a narrative
Perform in front of an audience

Curriculum link: Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression
Improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of music

LESSON 1

Watching and listening

This activity needs a lot of space. Clear your classroom tables to the side of the room or use a large space like the hall.

1. Prepare your class

Explain to your class that you are going to begin a 6-week music project focusing on a fantastic piece of music by a composer called Mussorgsky and watch the introductory film with Dan Starkey

2. Have a class discussion

about what you have just seen. Ask your children to imagine they are attending a party and all the guests are witches. Ask them to imagine the venue, the food, the dances and what else the witches might get up to

3. Watch the full orchestra performance.

Tell your children that this is the music the witches dance to. Can they spot the moment when the dancing stops and the sun comes up signalling the end of the party?

4. Listening/ movement task

Split your class into small groups of about 6-8 children. When everyone knows which group they are in, ask them to split up and spread out across the space. As you play the first 30 seconds of the full orchestral performance again, their task is to find one another and make a circle. They must imagine they are witches (or wizards or warlocks!) standing around a bubbling cauldron.

Play this section of music several times until everyone has achieved the task. They need to move quickly but also quietly and like witches!

5. Play the section between 0'30 and 1'26.

Ask the children to decide what is happening at this point and why the music abruptly stops. Maybe this is a witchy dance? Challenge your groups to make gestures to fit the shape of the music. They must keep their circle shape but they can move around their imaginary cauldron however they like.

6. Play the section between 1'26 and about 2'24.

The music gradually speeds up here and it is clearly in 4 beat phrases. Can your groups invent four simple gestures that fit with the music but then speed up along with it? Maybe the witches are casting a spell here.

7. Play the ending: 2'24 – end.

This is the sound of the sun coming up and the party ending. The witches must disappear or return to normal. Challenge your children to slowly move away from their groups and 'fade away'. Perhaps they slowly sink down and become the smallest shape they can be. Perhaps they open their arms up to the sun...

- 8. End the lesson** with a performance of your witches' dance to the full orchestral performance. If you don't have enough room for everyone to dance at once, encourage half of the groups to dance whilst the other half watch, then switch.

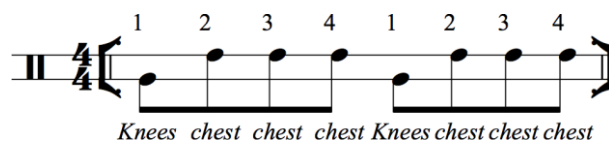
LESSON 2

Casting a spell

- Warm-up.** Begin with your class sitting in a large circle. Start by passing a clap around the circle to get some focus and then quickly remind the class about Mussorgsky's piece. Remind them that Mussorgsky was describing a night of partying and dancing for a group of witches on a lonely mountain top.

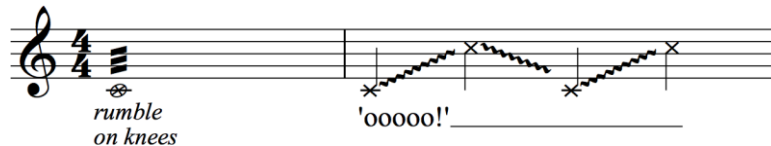
Explain that you are now going to begin creating your own version of it on instruments.

- Teach the following 'footsteps' pattern to your class**



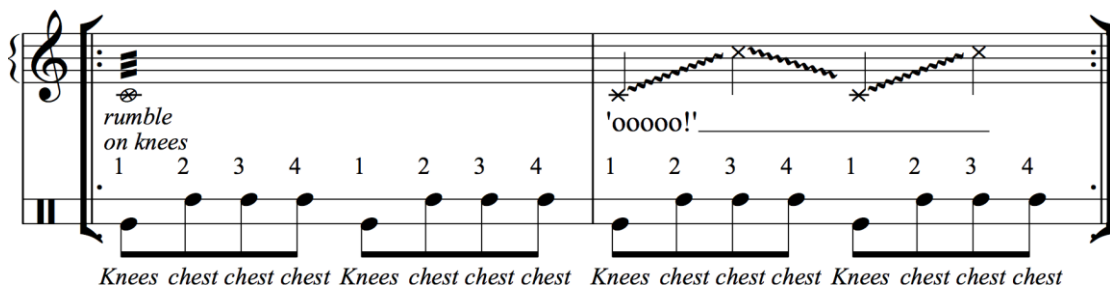
...and practice until it is neat and you can start and stop together. Explain that this is the sound of the witches' feet.

- Next, teach this pattern –**



This is the sound witches' make when they cast a spell.

- Split the circle into two halves.** Ask one side to perform the witches' footsteps while the other side performs the witches' spell. It will help if you start the footsteps first and once that is established, add the 'spell' on top. This is how they fit together –



Switch over so that everyone gets to try each idea.

5. **Demonstrate** how these patterns might transfer onto instruments. The footsteps, for example, could be played on a drum and a shaker; the swoops up and down could be a swipe (glissando) on a xylophone. Ask the children to figure out which instruments to use.

6. **Split into small working groups** and challenge each group to make their own version of these two ingredients on instruments. You can also add in any orchestral instruments your children might be learning or, if you are lacking in resources, encourage some children to stick to body percussion and voice.

7. **Bring the class back together again** and ask your children to put all of their pieces together to make one big piece. They need to decide –
 - the order of the groups
 - if the groups stay separate or try layering up their ideas (this will work if the tempo of each group is the same)
 - how many times the patterns are repeated

8. **Finish the lesson** with a performance of this piece and remember to write down carefully what you have done and who played what.

LESSON 3

Witches' ingredients

1. **Warm up.** Begin in a circle and lead the 'casting a spell' warm-up from last week. (i.e. the footsteps and the swoops). Explain that today you are going to use a tune borrowed from Mussorgsky and write some lyrics to fit with it.

2. **Teach this simple tune –**



Ask your class to sing it to an 'ah' sound or play it on their instruments. If you don't have a G#, replace it with another A.

3. **Working as a full class,** create words for this tune that describe the nasty ingredients going into the spell or even what the spell does! You can structure the tune however you want, repeating all of it or just parts. You could even create a new tune to follow this one.
4. **Get out the instruments and make a class version** of this tune with your new lyrics. You could include singing, playing the tune and even add a simple accompaniment – the footsteps and swoops from lesson 1 will all fit with this tune but you might like to keep it really simple by just adding a pulse.

Make sure that everyone has the same instrument that they had last week.

5. **When this is achieved,** working either as a full class or back in groups, put the 'Introduction' (casting a spell) piece back together from last lesson. Ask the class which order they want to perform these two sections – should the singing come first or second?
6. **Finish** this lesson with a performance of you piece so far. Tell the children that you have now created the introduction to your bigger piece and call it 'The Spell'. Don't forget to keep a record of it.

LESSON 4

Witches' dance

- Warm up.** Begin in a circle and after passing a clap around to get some focus, recap the spell patterns from last lesson. Also, sing through your spell lyrics. Explain that you are going to move on to making the music for the witches' dance today.

- Teach this new rhythm –**

I'm a witch I'm dancing through the night'

Ask one child to try playing it on an unpitched percussion instrument.

Next, introduce the following pitches –

I'm a witch I'm dancing through the night'

- Explain that this rhythm works well with footsteps underneath.** Your children can use the same footsteps as last lesson –

Drum shake shake shake Drum shake shake shake Drum shake shake shake Drum shake shake shake

Or these slightly simpler footsteps -

4. **Split back into your smaller working groups** and challenge each group to make a short 'dance' piece using these two (or three) ingredients. They may also add other witchy sound effects such as scratching rats, a cat meowing and a witch's cackling laugh.
5. **Bring the class back together** and hear their efforts. Ask the class to put the group pieces together to make one big dance
6. **Remind your class** that the dance section of Mussorgsky's piece starts slowly and speeds up. They may remember dancing to it during lesson 1. You could watch the recording again – it comes at 1'26 in the full orchestral performance. The technical term for when music gradually speeds up is *accelerando*. Challenge your class to add an *accelerando* to their new dance piece.
7. **Finally** write down carefully on the board what you have done and the role everyone plays. Play through your dance once more to end the lesson with music.

LESSON 5

Dawn

1. **Warm-up.** Sitting in a circle again, remind your children of everything they have worked on so far and make a list on the board. It should look like this:

- The Spell – casting a spell made from footsteps, shimmer, tune
- Dance – made from ‘I’m a witch’ rhythm, footsteps and sound effects

Practise some of these ideas off-instruments using body percussion and voices. This is a chance to remember but also to fix any problems that may have arisen with rhythms etc.

2. **Remind your class** about the ending of Mussorgsky’s piece – the music becomes gentle and calm and describes the sun rising and the witches’ party ending.

3. **There are three ingredients** in this section. Demonstrate them to the class –

- Slow footsteps



This is the same pattern you used in lesson 1 but turned upside-down and played much slower

- A rising tune using next-door notes
 - A slow, tolling bell
4. **Split back into your working groups.** The task is to make a short, gentle and quiet ‘dawn’ piece using these ingredients.
 5. **Bring the groups back together** and after hearing each ‘dawn’ piece one by one, ask the class to structure their ideas into one bigger piece. Remind them to keep their music slow, gentle and soft.
 6. **Finish this lesson** with a performance of your ‘dawn’ piece and write down what you have done.

LESSON 6

Performance time!

1. **Warm up.** Begin the lesson with a quick focusing warm-up like pass the clap and then talk through everything you have made so far, making a list on the board.

It should look something like this –

- The Spell – footsteps, shimmer, tune
- Dance – ‘I’m a witch’ rhythm, footsteps and sound effects
- Dawn – upside-down footsteps, rising tune and bells

2. **Get the instruments out** and begin by asking each group to remember their individual sections before working as a full group to put all three sections back together. Work slowly and carefully and make sure that everyone understands what they are doing in each section.
3. **Structure.** Ask your class to come up with an order for these sections. You could remind them of Mussorgsky’s order (Spell – Dance - Dawn) or let the children create their own unique version. Perhaps they will choose to tell a completely different story!
4. **Practise your full piece** until it is nearly perfect and then arrange your new ‘orchestra’ in a large semi-circle so that they can be seen by an audience. **End this lesson** with a performance of your finished piece to an invited audience

TAKING IT FURTHER

Cross-curricular activities

- **ARTWORK:** Listen to Mussorgsky's piece again and use it as inspiration for artwork. Can you draw the witches' party?
- **LITERACY:** Tell the story of the witches. Why are they celebrating? Where have they come from? Where do they go at dawn?
- **LISTENING:** Many composers have written music to describe stories (tone poems) and there are lots to explore and be inspired by. Some of the best are: Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, Borodin's *In the Steppes of Central Asia*, Dvorak's *The Noon Witch* and Saint-Saens' *Danse Macabre*.

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