

Short Ride in a Fast Machine by John Adams

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: John ADAMS (born 1947)

- American composer.
- One of the most famous composers in the world.
- His musical style is known as 2nd generation minimalism

The music: Short Ride in a Fast Machine

- Written in 1986
- Described as a ‘fanfare for orchestra’
- Was inspired by a ride Adams took in his brother’s new sports car
- Is one of the most performed pieces of music in the world

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

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)
Orchestrate	choose which instruments perform which parts of the music
Ostinato	a repeating pattern
Pitched percussion	percussion instruments that can play different pitches – xylophones, glockenspiels, chime bars etc.
Pulse	the steady 'beat' under much music made up of notes of the same length (like a ticking clock)
Tempo	another word for speed
Tune	another word for 'melody'. A linear line of notes, like a musical sentence
Unpitched percussion	percussion instruments that can only make a limited number of sounds – drums, shakers woodblocks, tambourine etc.

Resources required

- A large space, art materials
- 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 an artwork 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 Adam'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: Create ostinatos and structure them into a 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 4:

- Activities: Create a tune
- 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: Orchestrate your tune

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

1. Prepare your class

Explain to your class that you are going to begin a six-week music project focusing on a fantastic piece of music by a composer called John Adams and watch the full orchestral performance online. Try to keep the name of the piece a secret at this point.

2. Have a class discussion

Speak about what you have just heard and seen. Tell your class that the music is describing something. Can they work out what it is?

Discuss their ideas before telling them that the music is describing travel. Someone is going on a journey.

3. Watch the orchestral performance again

Afterwards, ask the following questions –

- What vehicle is the music describing?
- Is it going fast or slow?
- Can you use two adjectives to describe the ride? Is it calm and safe or something else?

Now you can reveal that the name of the piece is ‘Short Ride in a Fast Machine’

4. Listening task

Give out paper and art materials. Ask your children to draw the vehicle that they think is being described by the music. They can draw a recognisable vehicle like a sports car or a rocket or invent a new form of transport. As your class work on this keep the music playing in the background for inspiration

5. When this is achieved and everyone has drawn a vehicle. Ask them to name their picture using this format:

_____ ride to _____ in a _____

The first ‘blank’ should be a descriptive word such as ‘scary’ or ‘slow’, the second ‘blank’ is a place and the third ‘blank’ is the name of the mode of transport. (For example – ‘scary ride to the moon in a spaceboat’)

6. **When this is achieved**, encourage some of your children to introduce their artwork and ideas to the class and discuss them.

7. **Now play the recording one last time**; ask your class to listen out for flashing or flourishing sounds (i.e. the flutes and piccolos 20 seconds in). Every time they hear these sounds they must add a corresponding mark on their artwork to make their vehicle look as if it is moving. As they listen through if there are any other musical ideas that inspire movement marks on the page they should add them in too.

8. **Finish your lesson** by watching the introductory film with Khalil Madovi which reveals that the piece is in fact describing a hair-raising ride in a sports car.

Keep the artwork safe, you will need it later on in this project.

LESSON 2

Ready, get set, intro!

1. **Warm-up.** Begin with your class sitting in a large circle. Pass a clap around the circle and have a race to see how fast you can pass it. Try clapping two times each, going clockwise and anti-clockwise, passing a stamp or a vocal sound etc.
2. **Remind** your children about John Adams' piece and the story behind it. Explain that you are now going to begin making your own version of it on instruments.
3. **Demonstrate the following three ideas;** these are taken from the beginning of 'Short ride...'

Swirls: three notes repeating rapidly –



Flashes of 'bright' percussion sounds such as a quick shake of a tambourine or a quick swipe of the beater up and down a glockenspiel (technical term: glissando or gliss)

Wheels - the gradual build-up of a chord (D, F#, A), that gets more and more frequent. I.e. one note during every count of four – two notes – three notes – constant, like this –



If you don't have any F#'s don't worry, just use Fs

4. **Ask your children** which instruments will best play each idea and quickly **split into three groups**, one group for each of these ideas. Each group must practice their idea, starting and stopping neatly
5. **Bring the class back together** and challenge the class to put their ideas together to create an exciting introduction with a definite stop.
6. **Finish the lesson** with a performance of your introduction and remember to write down carefully what you have done and who played what.

LESSON 3

Travelling Ostinatos

1. **Warm up.** Begin in a circle and lead the racing clap around the circle again.

Next, clap a steady pulse and ask the class to join in with you. When everyone is clapping along the aim is to keep steady and not speed up. Signal a clear stop and work on the class stopping together neatly. Remind your class of the almost constant woodblock pulse in Adams' piece.

2. **Explain** that you are going to make some **repeating rhythmic patterns** to go on top of a pulse. The 'posh' word for repeating rhythmic pattern is **ostinato**.

One of the best ways to create **ostinatos** with children is to use words. You can use the artwork your children created in lesson 1 to help. Here's a simple method -

- Choose one of the pictures from lesson 1 and write its travelling words on the board. (Or ask the question 'where and how are you travelling?')
- Play a steady pulse on a drum or woodblock or ask a confident child to do so
- Encourage your children to think the sentence on the board to the pulse
- Choose someone to say the sentence out loud, fitting it to the pulse and repeating it round and around.
- Demonstrate how you can move from saying the words to body percussion by clapping every syllable.

At this point you have created an **ostinato**.

3. **Split the class into small groups with about 6 children in each team.**

Challenge each group to go through these steps again either using a sentence from their artwork or a new sentence about travel. As they work on this, move around the class and check that everyone understands the task. This is also an opportunity to tweak their sentences so that you have a nice mixture of long, complicated ostinatos and short, easier ones.

4. **Give out the instruments you used last lesson** and perhaps a few additional ones. Aim for a nice mix of instruments in each group.

Demonstrate an ostinato on an **unpitched** instrument and then on a **pitched** instrument using just the following pitches (borrowed from John Adams) –



Or you can choose pitches to suit the instruments you have available and the level of your children. If they are learning orchestral instruments, ask them which pitches they know and like the best but limit their choice to just 5.

5. **Challenge each group** to make a short piece using –
 - a. One or two ‘travelling’ ostinatos
 - b. A strong pulse (ideally played on a woodblock)

6. **Bring the groups back together** and hear each one individually. Encourage the class to give a bit of positive feedback. You are looking for neat patterns, a good start and stop, and no speeding up

7. **Ask the class** to work out a structure for all these pieces to make one big travelling piece.

If all the groups are using the same five pitches and playing at the same tempo (or speed), their pieces will easily fit on top of each other. Keep it neat with a strong pulse, just as John Adams does!

8. **Finish the session** by playing through your new piece and if there’s time, try playing the introduction from last lesson too just to keep it in everyone’s memory.

Write down what you have created. If you simply write down the words for each rhythm, the children will probably remember the rhythm next time. Without the words, you may find you are starting again from scratch!

LESSON 4

The big tune 1

- Warm up.** Begin again in a circle and after playing your race-clap game.

Ask the children to remember their ostinatos from last lesson and clap them on top of your pulse. You can even quickly layer them up in the order you agreed on. You might also like to recap, on body percussion and voice only, the three ideas from your introduction (the swirls, the wheels and the flashes).

- Explain** that you are going to make a big tune today. Remind your class of the notes they used last week – C, D, E, F#, A, and get out instruments with these pitches on.
- Working as a full class,** ask your children to suggest an order for these pitches so that it is more interesting than just moving upwards or downwards in order. They may repeat notes but this new order needs to be easy to remember so perhaps limit it to 8 notes in total.

You might end up with something like this –



Practise cycling through these notes in your new order with everyone playing each note 4 times, like this:

A	F#	A	E	A	D	C	C
4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4

- Now** ask your children to come up with one number for each note. Sensible numbers between perhaps 2 and 10 and again, easy to remember.

- Write these numbers** under the notes on the board like this –

A	F#	A	E	A	D	C	C
2	4	2	6	2	8	3	3

...and practise playing this pattern. Encourage children without pitched instruments to either play a steady pulse or help with the counting. You might want to split back into your groups to practise this.

6. **Finally**, challenge your players to hold the note for the length of the count rather than play on every beat, like this –



This is quite easy if you are playing an instrument capable of making long sounds like a violin or a flute. Xylophones are only capable of short sounds so players can either play just on the 1st beat of each count, create a shimmer of fast repeated notes or stick to playing on each beat. The latter option is by far the easiest and will help to keep everyone else in time too

You just have composed a tune (or melody).

7. **Finally**, end this lesson with a performance of your new tune. Remember, as always, to write down what you have done and who played what.

LESSON 5

The big tune 2

1. **Warm-up.** Begin this lesson by reminding your class of the tune they made last week. Write it on the board again and practice saying (or singing) the note names to a pulse.
2. **Get the instruments out** making sure that everyone has the same instrument they have been using throughout the project so far. Practise playing through the tune with one or two children keeping a steady pulse for everyone else.
3. **Challenge your class**, either working back in groups or as a whole, to orchestrate their tune. To do this they must decide –
 - How many times to play it
 - Who plays when – not everyone has to play all the time or at the same time (it might even work as a round!)
 - What the unpitched players add. You need a pulse in your piece somewhere but other children could perhaps add their ‘flashes’ or ‘swirls’ or something new

If you split into groups to achieve this task you will end up with several versions of the tune. This will make your piece longer and more complex. If your children are struggling to remember everything at this stage, make one class version of the tune instead.

4. **When this is achieved**, write down the structure of the tune and who does what. End the lesson by playing through your finished, orchestrated tune and, if you have time, remind your children of the two other sections of music they have made so far – the Introduction and the ‘Travelling ostinatos’. Explain that you are going to put everything together into one big piece during the next lesson ready for performance!

LESSON 6

Structure and performance time!

- 1. Warm up.** Sitting in a circle again, play your race-clap game or lead the children in layering up their ostinatos. You could also sing through your tune.
- 2. Remind your children** of everything they have worked on so far and make a list on the board. It should look like this –
 - Introduction – swirls, flashes, wheels
 - Travelling ostinatos – using just 5 pitches, possibly layered up or moving from group to group
 - Big tune – with pulse and other sound effects
- 3. Put these sections back together.** Working in small groups first and then slowly bringing the class and bigger pieces back together. Make sure everyone knows what they are doing in each piece.
- 4. Ask your children** to come up with a structure for their piece. Prompt their thinking with the following questions –
 - How do you order these sections to make the most effective music?
 - How do you seamlessly move from section to section?
 - How do you start and stop?
 - Do you need anything else in your piece to make it work?
- 5. Try out several suggestions** until everyone agrees on the best one and write this up on the board. Choose a title for your work from the artwork you made in lesson 1. Then practise this final version until it is ready for performance.
- 6. Finally,** invite another class in to hear your finished work. You could even display your artwork from lesson 1 behind the 'band' or challenge the audience to make artwork inspired by your new composition!

TAKING IT FURTHER

Cross-curricular activities

- **ARTWORK:** Make a 'fast machine' out of old boxes and junk and then have a race around the playground!
- **LITERACY:** Write a sports report about your fast ride or a newspaper report about the resulting crash!
- **LISTENING:** Another great piece about travel is *Pacific 231* by Arthur Honegger. It describes a journey by train. You could repeat this whole project with Honegger's piece as stimulus or use it for a compare and contrast exercise. Similarly, Ron Goodwin's *633 Squadron* describes plane travel and *Scheherazade Mvt 1: Sinbad's Ship* by Rimsky-Korsakov describes a ship at sea.

© Copyright Rachel Leach London 2018