

Lesson Plan: The Elements of Music—How do Composers Plan?

Grade level: 5-8

Objective

Students will learn about different elements of composition—pulse, melody, tempo and harmony—that composers use to reach their desired goals. Students will compare and contrast two musical selections by Tchaikovsky, identifying the compositional elements used, and will determine the musical outcome.

Resources Needed

Recordings:

- Tchaikovsky *Swan Lake*: Introduction
- Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 4: Finale
- Short selections of music that highlight pulse, melody, tempo, and harmony

Vocabulary

- Pulse
- Melody
- Tempo
- Harmony

Pre-Lesson Discussion

Talk with the students about taking a trip. Pick a city that is far away and discuss the many different things you have to consider before reaching your destination. Will you drive, fly, take a train or bus? Can you go by yourself or do you need to take others with you? Do you need money for tolls, gas, airfare or meals? How long will it take for you to get there—will you stop along the way to see sights, or will you go straight there? Will your trip have a theme? Then discuss how composers have to think through many of the same issues when they compose music. Composers pick their desired destination, then they have to figure out how to get there using pulse, melody, tempo and harmony.

Teaching Sequence

- Define pulse, melody, tempo and harmony. Listen to musical examples that highlight each element. Use the human body as an analogy – the pulse is the heartbeat; the melody is the personality; the tempo is the body’s movement; and the harmony is the skeleton that holds the body together and gives it shape. Explain that these are the different things composers can use to reach their desired destinations in their music. Discuss different goals, ideas and themes that composers might have for the music they compose.
- Listen to Tchaikovsky’s Finale from Symphony Number Four. Discuss which elements they hear in the music. Listen again. Identify key instruments that are used. Have the students come up with words that describe the pulse, melodies, tempo and harmony they hear in the music. Ask the students if they can imagine what goal/destination Tchaikovsky was trying to reach at the beginning of this movement.
- Listen to the Introduction from Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*. Go through the same exercise as above.
- Compare and contrast the two selections.
- Discuss different goals and destinations that Tchaikovsky was perhaps trying to reach in these two pieces. What choices did Tchaikovsky make with the elements that helped him achieve those goals?

For Further Exploration

- Have students set a personal goal. Ask them what choices they have to make that will determine the outcome of their goals.

Evaluation

Can students identify pulse, melody, tempo and harmony in music they listen to? Can they relate the elements of composition to the composer’s goals?

This lesson plan was produced by the Boston Symphony Orchestra to prepare children for the “Driving Forces” Youth and Family Concert Series March 3-6, 2010.