

## Topic: Creating Music from Stories

Some thoughts on choosing **stories** from which to compose:

The most important factor in choosing a story, of course, is that it is interesting to and appropriate for the students.

In addition, stories should lend themselves to musical interpretation. Particularly for less advanced activities, good features to look for could include:

- “sound effects” moments that happen in the story (eg. clock ticking, object breaking, monster roaring, etc.)
- actions that might be “musicalized” (eg. running, falling, flying, eating etc.)
- a repeated refrain, repeated events, and/or characters that return

1. **Read the story.** For some populations, you may want to read the story every day for a while leading up to the composition activities, until they are very familiarized with it.

==> **TIP:** One teacher recommended occasionally reading the story as a rap, using the percussion “beats” on a keyboard as background.

2. **Identify an element in the story to be “musicalized.”** This could be a character, an action, a feeling, or an object. Choices depend on the story and the level of the students.

a) With younger/less cognitively advanced students, identify a character in the story, or give them a choice between two characters.

b) With more capable students, have them retell you the plot of the story, and write down their ideas. Include characters, setting, events, feelings, etc. Then children can select an element they feel should have a musical sound.

3. **“Musicalizing,” or creating musical motifs:** Choose musical sounds to represent the character, object, action, etc. that has been chosen. Sounds can be musically simple (the giant=hit the drum) or complex, depending on the story’s needs and the level of the children.

Options for creating (non-melodic) musical motifs (for melodic motifs, please see below) -- consider some or all as dictated by children’s abilities:

- a) Orchestration: Choose an instrument to represent the story element.
- b) Dynamics: Decide whether the instrument should be played with a loud, quiet or medium dynamic, based on what is most appropriate to the idea being represented.
- c) Tempo: Decide whether the instrument should be played with a fast, slow or medium tempo, based on what is most appropriate to the idea being represented.
- d) Rhythm: Decide whether the instrument should be played with a predetermined rhythm, and what the rhythm should be.

==> **TIP:** Whenever children are making choices, always ask the question, “Why?” (assuming they are capable of giving you an answer, of course). The point is to make connections between non-musical elements and sounds; asking children to explain the reasons for their choices can help focus their thinking.

**4. Create more motifs:** Repeat #3 for other elements of the story.

**5. Creating melodic motifs:** Melodic motifs can be created for any story elements, as desired. The same considerations should be made (i.e., appropriate orchestration, dynamics, tempo, etc.) as for non-pitched motifs, in addition to the pitch selection process described below.

- a) Have children choose three or four different pitches. This can be done in different ways:
  - i. select the actual instruments (Boomwhackers, resonator bells, etc.)
  - ii. write the names of pitches on slips of paper; have the children pull three or four out of a hat
- b) Play the pitches in the order they are selected. Ask children to describe the mood of the motif -- does it sound joyful? angry? lonely? creepy?

==> **TIP #1:** After the pitches are selected, it is sometimes helpful to play them on the piano rather than on the resonator bells or the Boomwhackers -- sometimes the timbre of the instruments overrides the actual sound of the pitches in terms of determining mood. The piano (or keyboard) has a more neutral timbre.

==> **TIP #2:** Sometimes children have difficulty coming up with emotional adjectives beyond “happy,” “sad,” or “scary.” It can be helpful to provide them with a list of emotions to draw from.

c) Different techniques can be used to change or enhance the mood of the motif:

- i. change the order of the pitches
- ii. change the rhythm in which the pitches are played
- iii. repeat or go back to pitches that have already been played (but don't make the motif too long -- it's generally much easier to work with motifs that have 3-8 notes total).

d) Once children are comfortable with creating melodic motifs and identifying the feelings they evoke, the process can be used to create motifs for specific story elements. Before working on the motif, discuss emotional adjectives that would describe the character, object, action or mood from the story, and make the motif match.

- i. Through the process outlined above, it is possible to develop a "library" of motifs that can be revisited later -- for example, children might create a "scary" motif, a "lonely" motif, a "confusion" motif, etc. Later, they may decide that a character in the story is very scary, and the "scary" motif would work for that character.
- ii. Motifs can be made up to match the emotion of the story element. For the most part, this will be accomplished by trial and error.

**6. Singing words:** If desired, certain words from the story can be sung. This can work particularly well if there is a repeated refrain.

**7. Performing the story:** Music can be performed either with the words of the story being spoken, or by itself.

a) Read the story (or have a child read or tell it). Children play their instruments/motifs when the corresponding character, activity, object or feeling occurs.

==> **TIP:** You may wish to use visual aids, such as (Meyer-Johnson) symbols, copies of illustrations from the book, or actual objects, to support the text.

b) Using illustrations from the book or symbols you and the class create yourselves, develop a visual storyboard that shows the story's sequence visually. This can be used as a sort of score to perform the music by itself, without hearing the words of the story.