



SAPERRE Resources

Carnival of the Animals Nick Chandley

Share a musical stimulus

This piece of music that you can find [here](#) – actually, fourteen movements that combine to form the whole – is, in my mind, one of the staples of any primary school’s music collection. Composed by Camille Saint-Saëns in 1886, it was, in his opinion, a ‘fun’ piece that depicts, musically, different animals (although he includes pianists as one of them!) in each piece. He refused to have it published until after his death for fear of it detracting from his more serious music. It was performed privately on only a few occasions during his life but, after being published soon after he died in 1921, it soon became a firm favourite with audiences and is now possibly his best known work.

This is a really good stimulus for enquiry because the music attempts to represent physical things through sounds. In order to do this, Saint-Saëns had to identify particular characteristics of each animal – for example, the gracefulness of the swan and the darting, ever-changing movement of fish in an aquarium – and use these to shape his music. It’s a great introduction to the notion that music can paint pictures in our minds and children really love it.

I’d start this enquiry with an opening activity of maybe playing The Swan, the penultimate of the fourteen pieces, and asking the children to think in pairs of words that come to mind. List the words on the board and then ask them, ‘If these words were to describe an animal, which one would it be?’ You might get some interesting suggestions, but each one should be accompanied by a good reason. I’d then play another two or three of the pieces as my main stimulus and lead into an enquiry. The whole set takes about 25 minutes so this would be too long as a stimulus, but the children will enjoy listening to it all at some point.

Ask questions

We shouldn’t forget though that we’re using this as a stimulus for philosophical enquiry, not just ‘guess the animal’, so questions that will help you here might include:

- Did anyone have a picture in their head when they listened to the music?
- Why do you think different children had different pictures in their head?
- Does this mean that music can be ‘seen’?
- If Saint-Saëns had included a snake, what characteristics of the snake would he have used for his music? How about a cat?
- Could someone compose a similar kind of thing to depict different colours?
- What words would you use to describe red? Green? Black? White?

Other thoughts

I’ve not touched here on whether music can link with the emotions, but maybe you could think about that another time. I wonder what a piece of music about myself would sound like...?

Author bio and links

Nick is a qualified teacher and has led numerous P4C courses. He has previously edited the SAPERE Level 1 handbook, for many years wrote the SAPERE monthly bulletin resources, and co-edited, with Lizzy Lewis, *Philosophy for Children Through The Secondary Curriculum* (Continuum, 2012). He helped develop the hugely successful *What’s the Big Idea?* TV series, now sold to over 100 countries worldwide, and was education consultant to the major documentary series *The World According to Kids* (BBC2) and most recently to *Feeling Better* (CBeebies), a show that helps young children manage their emotions.

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