

Mars by Gustav Holst

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

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Background

The composer: Gustav Holst (1874 - 1934)

- British composer
- Eccentric character - fascinated by space, astrology, alternative faiths, meditation and vegetarianism

The music: 'Mars' from The Planets Suite

- Written in 1918 for very large orchestra
- The full suite describes 7 planets (no Pluto or Earth)
- Holst was particularly interested in the 'character' of each planet rather than its science

Learning outcomes

Learners will:

- listen and reflect on a piece of orchestral music
- learn musical motifs from Holst's Mars and structure them into a piece
- 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

Coda	another word for 'ending'
Crescendo	gradually getting louder
Motif	a small musical idea
Ostinato	a repeating pattern
Pitched percussion	percussion instruments that can play different pitches – xylophones, glockenspiels, chime bars etc.
Pulse	the steady "beat" underneath much music made up of notes of the same length (like a ticking clock or steady footsteps)
Unpitched percussion	percussion instruments that can only make a limited number of sounds – drums, shakers woodblocks, tambourine etc.

Resources required

- Paper and pens
- 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
Use the music as stimulus for artwork
- 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
Develop an understanding of the history of music

Lesson 2:

- Activities: Learn two asymmetrical ostinatos
Orchestrate them and use them to create a crescendo
- Curriculum link: Listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory
Play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression

Lesson 3:

- Activities: Invent new ostinatos in a march style
Choose appropriate instruments and work in groups to structure these ideas
- 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: Structure two pieces of music into one larger piece
- Curriculum link: 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: Follow a diagram (or listen and invent a diagram) to create Holst's coda
Structure all ideas so far into one big piece and perform it to an audience
Use technical terminology where appropriate

Curriculum link: Improve 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 6:

Activities: Create musical motifs to describe a new planet
Structure these ideas into a piece

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 6-week music project focusing on a fantastic piece of music by a composer called Gustav Holst. Explain further that Holst wrote music to describe the planets.

2. Watch the orchestral performance film of Mars from the BBC 10 Pieces website (note that this is a shorter version than the original and so it is perfect for use in the classroom)

Ask your children which planet they think it might be describing and after discussing their ideas reveal that it is Mars. Holst called Mars the Bringer of War.

At this point in the project you may also like to watch the introduction to Mars with Dick and Dom – also on the BBC 10 Pieces website

3. Listening task. Give out paper and coloured pens to your class. As you watch and listen again ask them to write down answers to the following questions –

- a) If the music was describing a colour, which colour would it be?
- b) If the music was describing a shape, which shape would it be?
- c) If the music was describing a line, would it be curvy and smooth or spiky and jagged?

Encourage your children to write just one or two words for each answer, so they should have a list like this –

- a) Purple
- b) A triangle
- c) Spiky

4. Explain that the music could be describing a spaceship travelling to Mars. As you listen again (perhaps several times), ask your class to draw the spaceship using the music as inspiration but also the short list they have made above. (i.e. this one would be purple, triangular and spiky)

5. Finally, discuss their artwork and show some to the class. Tell them that all of their efforts are correct because it is what they imagined whilst they listened.

6. **Split into two teams** and challenge each team to play one of these rhythms on their chosen instruments
7. **Bring the groups back together** and listen to their pieces. Ask them to try performing at the same time.
8. **Finally**, if you have time, listen and watch the opening of Mars on the website (just the first minute or so). Ask your children to identify what happens to the volume. Hopefully they will say it gets louder. Tell them that the technical term for music gradually getting louder is **crescendo** and **challenge** them to play their patterns together one more time and add in a crescendo

LESSON 3

March

In the full version of Mars (lasting about 7 minutes and available widely) Holst creates a middle section which is a march and sounds like an army approaching. You might want to play this section to the class, it begins about 2 minutes into the full version

1. **Warm up.** Begin again with your class sitting in a circle. Spend a couple of minutes clapping the two ostinatos from last lesson as a gentle reminder of what you did last time.
2. **Explain** that Mars is written in the style of a march. March music often includes the sound of footsteps. Demonstrate a steady pulse by tapping your knees left, right, left, right in turn keeping the beat even and at a moderate pace. Encourage your children to join in and to stop when you make a big stop sign. These are your musical footsteps, technical term: pulse

You can have some fun with this: choose one child to be the leader who signals the start and the stop; try it at different speeds; try speeding up and slowing down together; encourage a small group to walk in time to the beat. These are all ways of practicing the task without it becoming boring

3. **Instruments.** Select one child to choose an instrument for the footsteps and practise with that child playing the footsteps while everyone else claps or taps
4. **Explain** that Holst adds some new ostinatos (repeating rhythmic patterns) to make his march and demonstrate the following method -
 - Ask your class a simple question such as 'what is Mars like?'
 - Ask your children to 'think' the answer over and over as you clap the pulse
 - Now, ask them to speak their answer over your pulse
 - And finally, ask them to clap the answer (clapping each syllable) round and around. By doing this they have created an **ostinato**
5. **Split** the class into small working groups (two or four) and challenge them to create their own march using these elements
 - A pulse (footsteps)
 - A new ostinato
 - A crescendo (gradually getting louder)
6. **Finally**, bring the class back together and listen to each group piece. Decide as a class how to combine them into one big march with a crescendo.

LESSON 4

Structure

- 1. Warm up.** Begin in a circle again and recap all of the rhythms you have worked with so far as body percussion. Here's a quick list of what you might have -
 - 'Get in a spaceship go to mars'
 - '8, 2, 10'
 - Pulse (These rhythms are in 5)
 - 'Footstep' pulse
 - New Mars ostinato (These rhythms are probably in 2 or 4)
- 2. Split back into your working groups,** get the instruments out (ensuring that everyone has the same instrument as last lesson) and put both pieces back together (i.e. the crescendo in 5 using Holst's ideas and the march using your new ostinatos)

This is a lot for your children to remember, don't panic if it's a bit of a mess at first. Work slowly and encourage the children to remind each other of what they did

- 3. Challenge** the class to come up with a structure or order for these two pieces. Ask them 'what should come first? What should come second? Should we repeat anything? Warn them (perhaps by trying it) that the two pieces won't work very well at the same time because of the counts - one is in 4, the other is in 5.

You might want to show them Holst's structure (below)

- Crescendo using 'get in a spaceship'
 - March (with crescendo)
 - New section combining ideas from both (both of his sections are in 5)
- 4. Finally,** practise your new structure until it is fixed and make a big diagram of it on the board listing all the important events.

LESSON 5

CODA (ending)

1. **Warm up** - Begin with a recap of all the rhythms and the structure on body percussion
2. **Explain** that Holst's piece has a special ending called a 'coda'. Write the following list on the board and have a quick discussion about it
 - Short scurrying x2
 - Long scurrying
 - Random 'bangs'
 - Long note (G)

OR... listen to the end of Mars and ask your class to write down or draw what is happening. Use the last 45 seconds of any version. Continue this lesson using their drawings (or 'scores') rather than your list

3. **Splitting back into your two original working groups**, challenge each group to interpret the list (or their drawings) using the instruments they already have
4. **Bring the groups back together** and hear what they have created. Ask the class to join their efforts together to make one big coda.

Once this is achieved listen to the real thing and follow the list (or their drawings) along.

5. **Finally**, add this coda on to the end of the piece you created last week and perform your finished piece to another class.

LESSON 6

Create your own 'new' planets piece

1. After a quick **warm up**, explain to your children that Holst didn't make a musical movement for Earth or Pluto (which wasn't discovered until many years after his piece was written and now has been downgraded to 'dwarf-planet' status). Their next task is to make your own version of Earth or Pluto or even an imaginary planet!
2. **Split the class into smaller working groups.** Ask each group to make a list of three things about their chosen planet. These can be descriptions of landscape, or life on the planet or scientific facts. (i.e. for Earth they could have a scientific fact - it is 71% water, or describe life here – i.e. busy, bustling cities full of traffic and people).
3. **Bring the class back together** and discuss their ideas. Ask each group to make a musical motif for each of the things on their list. Motif is the term for a short musical idea. It can be a rhythm, a collection of notes or even a sound effect. Encourage your students to keep their motifs short and simple.
4. **Challenge** each group to make a short piece from these motifs (just as Holst did with his motifs for Mars). They could use the following questions to help them
 - What goes first?
 - What goes last?
 - Do any of the ideas fit together?
 - Do the ideas overlap, transform or repeat?
5. **Finally**, hear their final pieces. You could even make a concert out of the new planet (group) pieces and the (full class) version of Mars with a backdrop of artwork inspired by the planets!

TAKING IT FURTHER

Cross-curricular activities

- **RESEARCH:** look into the science of the other planets
- **LISTENING:** Holst did write music for Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. Listen to these pieces and use them as the inspiration for further art-work, literacy and music
- **LITERACY:** Write a story or newspaper report about travelling to and landing on one of the planets.
- **ART:** invent and draw a new planet.

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