Mussorgsky: Night on a Bare Mountain

The facts: Russian composer Mussorgsky (1839 – 1881) never finished anything, this piece was finished by his friend Rimsky Korsakov! It describes witches dancing throughout the night and casting spells.

Warm-up: Cast a spell! Split the circle into two quick groups. Ask one group to tap fast footsteps on their knees. Ask the others to make a rumble and then swoop up and down with their voices like this:

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(rumble) "ooooo!"
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Demonstrate these ideas on instruments. The footsteps could be played on drums, the swoops up and down could be on any shaky untuned instruments. Try your warm-up again, using instruments.

The Introduction uses these ideas plus a solemn spooky tune. Mussorgsky’s tune which is made up of slow, next-door-notes like this –

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\[ \text{C B A C} \]
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Add a tune like this to your footsteps and swoops to make a spooky introduction.

The Dance: Much of the rest of Mussorgsky’s piece is a witchy dance. Begin by clapping his dance rhythm:

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\[ \text{E F E D E F G A E} \]
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"I'm a witch, I'm dancing through the night..."

Adding words to rhythms helps children to remember them and clap neatly, especially if you explain first that they are clapping each syllable of their words.

The Task
Split the class into small working groups and ask each group to create a witchy dance using Mussorgsky's rhythm and adding witchy sound effects and the sound of dancing feet.

Share and Join
Listen to each group and discuss how you can put the groups together to make one ghoulish dance. Perform this after your introduction.

Finishing off
At the very end of Mussorgsky’s piece we hear a bell chiming (signifying morning) and a calm tune as the sun comes up. Can you add these two ideas onto the end of your piece – a chiming bell and a sunlight sound effect?