JOHN ADAMS (b. 1947)

Short Ride in a Fast Machine

Focus of Lesson
- Introduction to the piece
- Identification of instrumentation
- Identification of key rhythmic features
- Explanation and understanding of minimalist music
- Creation of new work in a group setting

Key Vocabulary
- Tempo: the speed at which a piece of music is played
- Fanfare: a short, lively tune usually played on brass instruments
- Rhythm: pattern of different length notes or sounds
- Pulse: a regular musical beat
- Minimalism: a simple style of music, often using repeated patterns

Try to introduce the above terms and their meanings to pupils during the lesson.

LESSON

Introduction
Short Ride in a Fast Machine was composed by 20th-century American composer John Adams, who is still alive today. It was written for an American orchestra to play at a big music festival called the ‘Great Woods Festival’, and is also known as a fanfare.

A fanfare is something that grabs people’s attention. It is often a loud piece, and usually played by brass instruments.

The music is written for a large orchestra, including many different types of percussion instruments. Throughout the 20th century, percussion instruments were used more and more in classical music, and these instruments often provided the foundation of the piece.

Listen to the beginning of the music, and ask pupils to listen out carefully for the trumpets, and other brass instruments. They are playing a rhythm made up of long and short notes.

Identify the sound of the woodblock at the very beginning of the music. Pupils should be able to hear this percussion instrument playing throughout most of the piece. This sets the tempo and the pulse of the piece. What does this sound like? Why is it important in this piece of music? Suggest to the pupils that this could be seen as the engine of the machine – a constant beat, ticking, keeping everything else around it going.

Explain that John Adams is a minimalist composer. This means that he wrote music that involved lots of repeated patterns. So, the same rhythm over and over again, or the same few notes. He builds these patterns up, one on top of another, using different instruments, to create a complete piece of music.
Minimalism is the genre of music used in this piece – it uses repetition and has a steady beat throughout.

**Create** a group piece of minimalist music. Sit pupils in a circle, and equip them each with a musical instrument (this can include a percussion instrument, or whatever is available). Demonstrate by playing a short rhythmic pattern on your instrument. Ask a pupil to copy what they have just heard. This means that they will need to listen very carefully (because they won’t want to get it wrong!), and in doing this they will create a repeated pattern.

When you have done this a number of times, select one of the patterns. You can illustrate this on a board by using dots and dashes to represent short and long notes, so that all pupils can see the pattern. Ask half of the group to represent the steady pulse (e.g. the woodblock) with their instruments, and ask the other half to take it in turns to play the pattern, using the pulse as an accompaniment. When everybody has had a go, swap over.

**Extension work**
Use the above pattern/s to form the rhythmic basis of a fanfare. For pupils who are able to play a melodic instrument, ask them to work in small groups to create a simple four-note melody that can be played on any instrument. They now have a steady pulse, a repeated rhythmic pattern, and a four-note melody. On a piece of paper, or a board, outline how each of these three elements will be used. Will they be played one at a time, or altogether, or a mixture of both? Make a list or a chart to remind pupils of the order in which each of the elements should be played, and help them to rehearse and perform it to the rest of the class.

**Learning Outcomes**
- Understanding how simple compositional techniques can be used to create a seemingly more complex work
- Understanding how rhythm and pulse underpin a musical work
- Understanding the importance of melodic and rhythmic patterns in a musical context
- Learning how to listen carefully in order to imitate sounds heard