BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913 - 1976)

‘Storm’ Interlude from ‘Peter Grimes’

Focus of Lesson
- Introduction to the piece
- Explanation and understanding of the opera genre
- Use of orchestration to create visual imagery
- Identification of instrumentation
- Analysis of mood and character
- Creation of new work with active feedback

Key Vocabulary
- Opera: a play or piece of drama set to music
- Interlude: the piece of music between each act in an opera or a ballet

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

LESSON

Introduction
‘Storm’ is a musical interlude from an opera called Peter Grimes, written by the 20th Century English composer, Benjamin Britten. The opera is a story about a local fisherman, Peter Grimes, and the community in which he lived. It is reminiscent of life in Aldeburgh, the small town on the Suffolk coast where Britten spent much of his life, and it was performed on the beach (in the open air!) in Aldeburgh in 2013, to celebrate the centenary of the composer’s birth.

Benjamin Britten loved the sea. He walked along the beach every day, and a lot of his music was inspired by the sea, how it looked, and how it sounded.

The piece of music is taken from a bigger work called an opera, and in between each act of the opera is an ‘Interlude’. In total, in Peter Grimes, there are four Interludes, each representing a different mood of the sea. This ‘Storm’ interlude comes at the end of the first act. Peter looks out to sea and sees the impending storm. Trouble is brewing…

Listen to the piece of music, and ask the pupils to paint a picture in their minds of what the storm looks like. Which colours are in their paintings? What images can they see (waves, boats, storm clouds, etc.)? Can pupils identify any of the instruments used to make the sounds that they are hearing? Could an individual instrument conjure up the same image, or do the instruments need to work together?

Identify the different elements of a thunderstorm at sea with the group. If they were standing on a beach or on a boat looking out at sea, what would they be looking at, and what would they hear? Help pupils to organise these ideas into the order of an actual storm, and create a ‘storm timeline’. Follow this while listening to the music, and try to identify how each element fits the music.
Explain (and ask pupils to listen carefully) how different instruments are used to convey different aspects of the storm. In the first half of the piece the pupils may hear timpani, cymbals, and low grumbling instruments; and in the middle section they will hear ‘softer’ instruments such as the flute and the harp. Why is this? Ask the pupils to identify which instruments create which character in the music.

Create your own piece of storm music, referencing the storm timeline. Use tuned and untuned percussion, as well as any melodic instruments that you can, to do this. Voices and body percussion can also be used (howling, whistling and shuffling feet all help to create storm-like sounds). Encourage pupils to imagine if their storm starts suddenly, or whether it creeps up on them and gets louder and louder. Is there a calm section? If so, when does that happen?

Perform the new works to the rest of the group. Ask for pupils’ feedback, and take a vote on which composition sounds most like a thunderstorm at sea. Why is that?

Extension work

‘Storm’ is one of four interludes in Britten’s opera. Ask pupils to use the internet to research the other three interludes. What are these interludes called, and what are they used to illustrate in the opera? If possible, play them a recording of these interludes as well, and help them to identify instruments and techniques used to create the scene. Further to this, pupils could draw or paint their own scene from Peter Grimes.

Learning Outcomes

- Understanding the role of individual instruments within an operatic setting
- Understanding the elements required to create a musical picture
- Linking aspects of music and composition to an artistic context
- Understanding the historical and geographical context of the music