GUSTAV HOLST (1874 – 1934)

‘Mars’ from ‘The Planets’

**Focus of Lesson**
- Introduction to the piece
- Identification of instrumentation and instrumental techniques
- Analysis of mood and character
- Creation of new work
- Active feedback on pupils’ work

**Key Vocabulary**
- Tempo: the speed at which a piece of music is played
- Dynamics: the volume of the sound or a note
- Ostinato: a repeated pattern of musical notes

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

**LESSON**

**Introduction**

‘Mars, Bringer of War’ is one movement from The Planets, written by Gustav Holst, between the years 1914-16, at the start of World War One. It was first performed immediately following the war, in 1918. The music is written for a big orchestra, and Holst chose to include a very large percussion section!

There are seven movements in The Planets, and each of these is a character piece, musically depicting the planet’s mood, and that of its Roman god. Holst’s love of astrology inspired him to write this work.

Listen to the opening of ‘Mars, Bringer of War’ and ask pupils for words to describe what they are hearing. How does the music make them feel? Why? Discuss the tempo – is it fast or slow? Does it change?

Identify the instruments being used in the opening bars. How are the string instruments being played? Explain to pupils that the strings are using a technique called *col legno* (col-len-yo), which literally means ‘with the wood’, and involves turning the bow over and hitting the strings with the wooden part of the bow. This creates a percussive effect.

Ask pupils to take it in turns to choose a percussion instrument. They should each play their percussion instrument to the rest of the group to explore the sound that each makes. Help the pupils identify each instrument by name. Then ask the pupils to find a new way to play their percussion instrument. For example, hit the wood on the side of a drum as opposed to on the top; or play the xylophone with the wrong end of the beater. Other pupils should close their eyes to listen to this sound, and name the instrument from the ‘new’ sound that it is making.
Explain that the music is written about the planet, Mars, but also about Mars, the Roman God of War. How are these two similar? Demonstrate and discuss how the relentless five-beat ostinato pattern, the thumping drums and the sound of the strings suggest evil, aggression and angst. The planet Mars reflects these characteristics, and its two moons have war-like names (Phobos: meaning ‘fear’; and Deimos: meaning ‘terror’). The heavy use of brass and percussion instruments, commonly associated with the military, suggests an army marching to war. Use of these instruments gives the music a dark mood, in the same way that an author creates a certain mood in a story by using descriptions.

Create a short piece of music, in small groups, focusing specifically on the use of an ostinato pattern throughout; and adding dynamic contrast through the use of crescendos and diminuendos. Pupils should use percussion instruments, voices or body percussion to create their own ‘Mars’ piece of music.

Perform these compositions to the rest of the class, and encourage feedback. Could pupils hear the ostinato pattern? Could they identify dynamic changes? Did it make them feel the same way as Holst’s music did? If not, how did it make them feel?

Extension work
Ask pupils to find out what the other six movements are in Holst’s The Planets. What are the planets, and the names of the Roman Gods? Listen to the music from each of these movements and identify characteristics of the music that relate to the character of the planet and the Roman God. Which instruments are used and why? Are they loud or quiet pieces of music? Are they fast or slow?

Learning Outcomes

- Understanding the role of individual instruments within an orchestral setting
- Understanding various instrumental techniques used to create effect
- Understanding the appropriate elements (tempo, dynamics, rhythm) required to create a stylistically similar piece of music
- Understanding the historical and astrological context of the music