MODEST MUSSORGSKY (1839 – 1881)

A Night on the Bare Mountain

Focus of Lesson
- Introduction to the piece
- How specific instruments are used to create certain moods
- The use of rests and pauses within a piece of music
- Creation of mood music
- Interaction with pupils’ performances, encouraging careful listening

Key Vocabulary
- **Melody**: lots of notes played one after the other, to form a tune
- **Tempo**: the speed at which a piece of music is played
- **Mood**: the feeling that a piece of music creates
- **Rest**: silence in a piece of music; a break or a pause

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

LESSON

Introduction
‘A Night on the Bare Mountain’ is a piece of music written by Modest Mussorgsky in 1867, depicting one night of the year when witches gathered at the top of a mountain. The night in question is 23rd June, also known as St John’s Eve which, according to popular belief, is the night when evil forces are at work and witches came out. It also happens to be the date that Mussorgsky finished writing this piece of music. Is that coincidence….? 

Some people might say this really happens on 23rd June every year, but some might say it is part of Russian folk tradition. Mussorgsky used a lot of Russian folk stories in his music – stories and tales can often help composers to write their music, and to inspire them.

The music finishes with six chimes, ringing out from the church bell. These chimes tell the witches that the sun is coming up, and it is time for them to disappear. They can come back again next year!

Mussorgsky wrote this piece of music incredibly quickly, in 12 days, although sadly it was never performed in his lifetime and so he never heard it. These days, it is one of his most popular works.

**Listen** out for the trombones and tuba near the beginning of the music, playing long rumbling notes. How do these big, heavy brass instruments make the pupils feel? Do instruments need to play really loudly to make you feel scared? Here, you get the feeling that something bad is about to happen, why does it make you feel like that?

**Identify** ways in which the music can make you feel excited and surprised. Mussorgsky is using lots of instruments all at once, and switching between them very quickly. Composers often use this technique of switching rapidly between instruments to
keep audiences on the edge of their seat, and to create suspense. If it was one instrument playing all of this, it wouldn’t be so exciting, would it? See how many different instruments pupils can recognise, and discuss with them which instruments create the most exciting sound.

**Explain** how, when a composer is writing music for a story, it is vital to create lots of different moods. For example, listen to the section of the music after the chiming of the six bells. Here, the mood completely changes; you hear the violins and French horn playing a soothing melody and the tempo is much slower. How is this different from the earlier scary music? Ask pupils also to listen out for sudden breaks or pauses in the music. Ask them to raise their hands in the air when they hear a break or a pause. Does this contribute to the tension as well?

**Create** a piece of mood music. Suggest that pupils work in small groups and choose three different moods (happy, sad, angry, worried, excited, tense, nervous, scared, anxious, etc.). On a piece of paper they could map out the moods, and when they change. Ask them to write down which instruments would be best to illustrate each mood. Should it be one continuous piece of music, or contain some breaks? Discuss with pupils the importance of rests and silences in music. Is there more suspense when the music is playing, or when there is complete silence?

**Perform** each new composition to the rest of the group. Encourage the audience to listen out specifically for breaks, silence or pauses in the music. You could ask each group to perform their piece twice – once to be listened to, and the second time round pupils could raise their hand when they hear any silence in the music.

**Extension work**
Find out about the myths and traditions surrounding St John’s Eve. It’s not a date that is widely acknowledged in the UK today, but in other countries there are celebrations and events that take place to mark the occasion. What are these? In which countries do these events take place? Why are bonfires lit?

Write a simple story about one of these countries, and what they do on St John’s Eve. It might be scary, but it might be more of a celebration. If there’s time, think about what sort of music you would write to illustrate your story. Which instruments would you use and why? How would you create the right mood?

**Learning Outcomes**
- Understanding how musical instruments create different moods and feelings
- Understanding the use of rests and pauses in a piece of music
- Understanding the historical and traditional context of the story and the music
- Learning to listen carefully to other performances
- Learning to recognise techniques used to create different moods