IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882 - 1971)

The Firebird - suite (1911) (Finale)

Focus of Lesson

- Introduction to the piece
- Orchestration, and ways in which this can create dynamic variation
- Introduction to the fanfare
- Use of repetitive melodies to create atmospheric build up
- Helping pupils’ musical memory through repetition

Key Vocabulary

- **Dynamics**: the volume of the sound or a note
- **Crescendo**: getting louder and louder
- **Fanfare**: a short, lively tune usually played on brass instruments
- **Sequence**: repetition of a short melodic phrase

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

LESSON

**Introduction**

Stravinsky wrote lots of ballet music, but ‘The Firebird’ was his first, and made him famous. The first performance in 1910, which took place in Paris, was very well received – it was just like having a No. 1 hit!

Ballets are stories told using dance and music. Many people like going to watch ballet, as they get to see the story as well as hear it. ‘The Firebird’ is a story about a young man called Prince Ivan who goes wandering and ends up in an enchanted garden belonging to an evil man named Kostcheï (kosh-ay). Ivan spots the beautiful Firebird and grabs her. She is desperate to be set free, and offers Ivan one of her feathers to be used if he is ever in trouble.

Ivan then falls in love with a beautiful girl called Tsarevna (tsa-rey-vna). She lives in Kostcheï’s kingdom though, and so Ivan can’t be with her. Kostcheï tries to turn Ivan into stone, and so he waves the feather and the Firebird comes to his rescue. Kostcheï is killed, Ivan and Tsarevna finally get married, and everybody joins in the celebration. Happy ever after!

Listen to this piece of music, which is actually the finale from the ballet. Stravinsky wrote this music for a large orchestra, with many instruments, and by the end of this piece you can hear them all playing. However, it begins quietly and, as each instrument enters, the dynamics get louder and louder. In music, this is called a crescendo (cre-shen-doe).

Identify the trumpet that enters towards the end of the piece. The trumpet is often used in a fanfare, which is a short piece of music used to announce something – an event or a person. In this case, the trumpet is announcing that Prince Ivan and Tsarevna are getting married. Fanfares are very often celebratory pieces of music and are usually played by brass instruments.
Explain how Stravinsky uses a technique called repetition to help build up the happy atmosphere and to get everybody excited. You can hear the melody played on brass instruments, which is repeated again and again. In music, this is also called a ‘sequence’. Play the melody to the pupils, and then ask them to listen and count how many times they can hear that same melody. They will need to listen really carefully.

Create a short piece of music, in small groups, based on a celebration. Ask pupils to discuss events in their own lives that they have celebrated, or have helped to celebrate (birthdays, other people’s weddings, end of term, winning a race at sport’s day, etc.). They should then choose one of these, and decide which instruments and sounds would best suit the event. Note in particular the triangle used at the end of ‘The Firebird’ – the constant ringing of this instrument is a very celebratory sound. Help pupils to create a simple melody (either with instruments or using their voices) and encourage them to repeat this, at different speeds and volumes, to help build up the piece of music.

Perform these pieces to the rest of the group. Is the audience able to sing the repeated melody back?

Extension work
Take a look at music for other ballets, also written by Stravinsky. What other stories did he use? Did they all have happy endings? Other composers wrote music for ballets too – can you name any?

Learning Outcomes
- Understanding the role of brass instruments in celebratory music
- Understanding the use of sequence and repetition to create musical effect
- Understanding the use of dynamics
- Understanding the background to the music, in the context of ballet and dance