

The Carnival of the Animals

Kevin Hamel

About the Unit

The unit of work

- sets The Carnival of the Animals within its musical, historical and social context
- provide audio examples of Saint-Saens musical animals
- shows ways that music can make us laugh
- shows how composers explore the inter-related dimensions of music to create musical sketches
- offers suggestions for composing and performing in response to The Carnival of the Animals

Saint-Saens and Carnival of the Animals

Natural History fascinated Saint Saens, who liked nothing better than a day out at the zoo. He composed *The Carnival of Animals* to play with his friends at an 1886 Mardi Gras (Shrove Tuesday) celebration

Fourteen short movements are scored for just eleven performers:

- two pianos
- two violins, viola, cello, double bass
- flute /piccolo
- clarinet (C and Bb)
- glass harmonica (now usually glockenspiel)
- xylophone

Through his musical sketches of animals, Saint Saens makes fun of composers like Rossini, Mendelssohn, Offenbach - and even himself! He humorously describes the work as 'a grand zoological fantasy', with the message that people (and especially musicians) really shouldn't take themselves too seriously.

Only *The Swan* was published during the composer's lifetime. Saint Saens could never have imagined the huge popularity *The Carnival of the Animals* would achieve. Some of the music is likely to be familiar to many children. Aquarium in particular has featured in the films *Babe* and *Charlotte's web* – and even in *The Simpsons*.

Developing pupils creative musical ideas: responding to The Carnival of the Animals

Children could compose their own suite of pieces depicting real or imaginary animals.

As well-known songs like *Old MacDonald* encourage animal imitations, expect children to begin with 'cock-doodle-doo' and other barnyard sounds. Encourage children to carefully observe the *ways animals move* rather than be too concerned about the *sounds* they make.

Movement may be interpreted through

- pitch (high/low)
- melody (proceeding by leaps and/or steps)

- pace (fast/slow)
- dynamics (loud/quiet)

Although talk should never dominate music lessons, there are opportunities to explore vocabulary describing the musical characteristics of Saint Saens' animals: *eg.* Fossils explores the 'brittle' timbre of the xylophone. Contrast this with, say, the 'silvery' quality of the glockenspiel in Aquarium.

Hens and Cockerels

Hens and Cockerels is a really carefully observed study of the way chickens and cockerels behave. Saint Saens chickens move jerkily, scratch, scrabble and peck for corn; the cockerel struts, puffs up his feathers and crows. Listen out for clarinet and piano cock-a-doodle-doo-ing, with the violin clucking, and sliding from note to note (glissando).

This is a comedy piece, ending with an egg being laid. The rooster interrupts the chickens from time to time as they peck for grain. Tension mounts grows as one of the chickens gets ready to lay an egg, and the piece ends abruptly as the egg is released with a pop.

Children could interpret the scenario entirely with their voices. There are also interesting possibilities for instruments (including involving beginner violinists sliding from note to note). Groups should plan how their performances will suggest the excitement and suspense preceding laying the egg. They might consider the effect of drum rolls in magic or acrobatic performances.

Zozo Shuaibu adopts the scenario as a challenge for beginner djembe players. Scratching and pecking are interpreted through different djembe strokes, and the growing tension and sudden delivery of the egg through controlled drum rolls. See Cumbria Music Service's West Africa Drumbeats programme.

Look out for even more bizarre chicken-related music in Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition!

Kangaroos

Saint Saens' kangaroos move by giant leaps and carefully controlled landings. Challenge the children to compose their own kangaroo music featuring melodies which move by leap and step.

- make your own Kangaroo music on xylophones
- practise leaping from note to note. Plan which notes you are going to jump from, and land on
- plan and practise quiet, gentle landings.

In the video clip, David Gill (director: South Lakes Safari Park) explains how Kangaroos use their tails to balance

Fossils

The xylophone plays a brittle-sounding and busy tune. This resembles the xylophone melody of Saint-Saen's *Danse Macabre*.

Could this be

- a tune played on a dinosaur's ribcage?
- an army of fossil collectors frantically chipping at rock surfaces with specimen hammers?

'*Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*' interrupts the tune briefly, before it returns again.

- find out about the orchestral xylophone from a local percussionist, or search online for a video demonstration.
- discuss differences between this and school xylophones: experiment with felt-headed and hard plastic beaters to match the 'brittle' sound (*timbre*)

Children are asked to find other instruments capable of making short, brittle sounds. These need not be pitched instruments. (*try Woodblocks and claves*).

Persistent hammering and tapping falls into regular rhythmic patterns. Experiment with layering and interlocking rhythms.

The 'hammering and chipping' may be interrupted by

- a quote from a nursery rhyme? (*Baa baa black sheep, Hickory Dickory Dock*,
- a well-worn classroom song (*Row your boat?*)
- a phrase from a television theme tune (lots of children can play the first phrase of the *Eastenders*)

Video: Chris Stones of SoundWave plays the Richardson set of Musical Stones (Keswick Museum and Art Gallery, Cumbria)

.

Tortoises

In Saint-Saens' day, the energetic high-kicking Can-Can (or *Chahut*) shocked audiences. Performed at the Moulin Rouge, the famous Paris cabaret and dance hall, it was famously portrayed by Toulouse-Lautrec's posters

The music that most often accompanies the Can Can is from Offenbach's opera *Orpheus in the Underworld*. In *The Carnival of the Animals*, Offenbach's famous Can-Can is thoughtfully slowed down to a crawl for the tortoises!

Some pupils might choose to compose a slow dance suited to a tortoise. Others might enter into the joke and re-arrange an unlikely piece of music. Many children enjoy performing dance routines to disco music. Usually, they know the words and tunes. Get them to think how an energetic performance could be adapted to suit a tortoise!

Hip Hop poet Danni Dee (Cantaloop) imagines the horror of a tortoise expected to perform the Can Can on stage!

Possible words for the Tortoise melody might be

This Tortoise may be slow and steady
But she's always ready
To perform a Can Can when she can
And if the music gets too quick
You'll find she'll always stick
At a slower pace
Behind her Ostrich fan!

Elephant

Here, the piano accompanies a tune played on double-bass suggesting a slow and plodding waltz. The elephant is no nimble-footed ballerina!

Here, as in *The Tortoise*, children are given opportunities to have fun with familiar tunes. Children might compare this with *The Swan*, where the beautiful cello melody with its gently rippling piano accompaniment is everything *The Elephant* isn't.

Aquarium

A gentle and mysterious tune on the violins is accompanied by patterns on the piano sounding like ripples on water.

Pupils could collaborate to make a graphic score suggesting fish in an aquarium

- consider quick, darting movements of small fish near the surface
- graceful, flowing movements of Angel fish swimming in the middle depths
- sluggish, slow-moving fish patrolling the depths of the aquarium.

The levels might suggest high, middle and low-pitched sounds, played at different speeds to reflect the movements of the fish.

Failing a trip to an aquarium, video and screensavers of fish are helpful in observing ways fish move, and could suggest ideas for inclusion in graphic scores.

The video clip features fish in a freshwater aquarium

Modern Foreign languages: *C'est l'heure du carnaval!*

The Carnival of Animals provides opportunities for children to describe animals characterised by the music, to talk about their habitats, and ask and answer questions about them.

Saint Saens writes his musical instructions in French, in place of the usual Italian. When creating their own musical scores for their animals, children could use the following musical instructions:

rapide quick

lent slow

rapidement quickly

lentement slowly

doucement softly

fort strong, loud(ly)

plus /moins more/less

Habitat

la savane the savanna

la forêt the forest

la mer the sea

une ferme a farm

Où habites-tu? Where do you live?

J'habite dans ... I live in ...

Animal names

C'est quel animal?

What animal is it?

le lion the lion

le coq the cock

le kangourou the kangaroo

le poisson the fish

le coucou the cuckoo

l'éléphant (m) the elephant

l'âne (m) the donkey

l'oiseau (m) the bird

la tortue the tortoise

la poule the hen

le cygnet the swan

Behaviour/Characteristics

timide timid

féroce fierce