The Composer is Dead

Text by
Lemony Snicket
Illustrated by Carson Ellis, Music by Nathaniel Stookey

LEVEL: Grade 4-7

Carson Ellis, Illustrator,
The Composer is Dead
The Composer Is Dead

LESSON 1: A Motive for Murder

OBJECTIVES - Students will:
1. Identify, describe and compare the elements of creative works from different genres.
2. Identify, describe and compare the purpose and theme of an artistic, literary and musical work.
3. Compare the similarities between the plot of a story and the form of a musical work.
4. Discuss the form of a musical work, and listen to examples demonstrating how the piece is organized.

STUDENT FRIENDLY OBJECTIVES:
1. Compare music, literature, and art by looking for similarities in how they are created.
2. Listen to and describe the purpose, theme and plan of an artistic, literary and musical work.

MATERIALS:
Core Lesson
- Common Creative Elements Chart – student copies
- Art example – Orchestra at the Opera – Degas
  www.edgar-degas.org/ Free use under http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/
- Recording of The Composer is Dead

Expanded Lesson
Activity 1
- Recording of The Composer is Dead
- Common Creative Elements Chart

Activity 2
- Transparency or projected image of Planning and Plotting Map
  (Pictures of instruments purchased from www.istockphoto.com for educational use)
- Story The Composer Is Dead - purchase required for lesson plan
  http://www.amazon.com/Composer-Dead-Book-CD/dp/0061236276
- Recording of The Composer is Dead
- Common Creative Elements Chart

Additional Teacher Resources:
- Discussion between Nathaniel Stookey and Lemony Snicket
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMCrZWE_YAU
- Purchase information for the book and CD
  http://www.amazon.com/Composer-Dead-Book-CD/dp/0061236276
- Description of Orchestra at the Opera by Degas
The Composer Is Dead

LESSON

Core Lesson
Time: 30 minutes

1. Explain to students that they will be preparing to attend a performance of *The Composer Is Dead*, by composer Nathaniel Stookey and writer Lemony Snicket. If any students have read books by Lemony Snicket, have them share information about what they have read.

2. Discuss the meaning of the word *motive* (a reason or purpose for doing something), and then ask students what motive the composer and writer might have in working together on this project. After students have shared their ideas, explain that the purpose of this work is to introduce students to the instruments of the orchestra and to create a lifetime interest in orchestral music. Ask students if they know of other examples of music that have this same motive. (Examples might be *Peter and the Wolf* and Benjamin Britten’s *Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra*).

3. Explain that all creative and artistic works have common elements. These usually include a purpose for creating the work, a theme or main idea, a plan for how the work will be organized, the development of the theme, and a way of expressing the main idea through tools, terms, and techniques unique to each creative area. Display the Common Creative Elements Chart and distribute student copies. Discuss each area by looking at the questions that might be considered when evaluating a creative work for its main elements.

4. As a class, evaluate an example of art for the elements in the chart, and discuss possible answers to the “Art” questions on the chart. The art example provided (*Orchestra at the Opera* by Degas) may be used, or one of the teacher’s choice. As the class decides on the answers, students should write them on their charts. Suggestions for answers are provided.

5. Tell students that they will be using the questions on this chart to explore the elements of *The Composer Is Dead* through the next few lessons. They already know the answer to the first set of questions about Purpose of *The Composer Is Dead*. Review the answer and have students write it on their charts.

Expanded Lesson

Activity 1: More Than One Motive
Time: 20 minutes

1. Explain to students that the word *motive* has another meaning in addition to the one they have just learned (a reason or purpose for doing something). In music, the word motive can also mean a musical idea or theme. In *The Composer Is Dead*, the main musical motive, or theme, is the same idea as in the story.

2. Ask students how they would describe the main theme of the story (ex. the death of the composer, finding out how the composer died, almost all well-known composers are dead, all composers die). Then ask students, if they had to pick one word to describe the theme, what would it be? (dead) Tell them that the composer, Nathaniel Stookey, used that word to inspire the main musical theme.
3. Have students discuss how they think that theme might sound - what instruments might be used, what dynamic levels, what tonality. Then play Track 1 to hear the theme, which occurs at the beginning (0:00) and again after the word “decomposing” (2:00). Discuss the elements just described (what instruments - brass, what dynamic level - loud, what tonality – minor) and then play again. Tell students they will hear this theme recurring throughout the piece. Explain that there will be many other musical ideas, which will be explored in Lesson 2.

4. Ask students to complete the Theme section of the Common Creative Elements Chart according to the description on the Answer Key 1.

Activity 2: Planning and Plotting

Time: 30 minutes

1. Explain to students that composers use the word *form* to describe the plan for a piece of music, while writers use the word *plot* to describe the plan for a novel or short story. In *The Composer Is Dead*, the form of the music is based on the plot of the story. For that reason, it is important to know the plot to understand how the music is organized.

2. Read aloud the story of *The Composer Is Dead* by Lemony Snicket. Ask students to think about how the composer might organize the music to reflect the plot of the story.

3. As a class, use the Planning and Plotting Map to discuss how the music will be organized. After reviewing the map, listen to the following excerpts that introduce the different sections of the orchestra as the music form and story plot develop.

   Track 2 (1:21) – Play the entire track to be introduced to the sections of the orchestra and the general form of the piece.

   Track 14 (2:04) – Play the entire track to hear the organization of the piece as each group of instruments provides an alibi, and to hear one recurrence of the main theme.

4. Ask students to complete the Plan section of the Common Creative Elements Chart according to the description on the Answer Key 1.
**Common Creative Elements Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Music</th>
<th>Literature</th>
<th>Art</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Why did the composer write the song?</td>
<td>Why did the writer write the story?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>What is the main musical idea?</td>
<td>What is the main idea of the story?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Plan</td>
<td>What is the form of the song?</td>
<td>What is the plot of the story?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>How does the composer develop the theme?</td>
<td>How does the writer develop the plot?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Techniques &amp; Terms</td>
<td>What musical terms describe techniques that are used?</td>
<td>What literary terms describe techniques that are used?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tools</td>
<td>What tools are used to express the musical ideas?</td>
<td>What tools does the writer use to tell the story?</td>
</tr>
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<td>Music</td>
<td>Literature</td>
</tr>
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<td>--------</td>
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<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Why did the composer write the song? To introduce students to the orchestra and create a life-long interest in the symphony</td>
<td>Why did the writer write the story? To introduce students to the orchestra and create a life-long interest in the symphony</td>
<td>Why did the artist paint the picture? To portray an orchestra playing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>What is the main musical idea? The “dead” theme</td>
<td>What is the main idea of the story? The death of the composer and finding the murderer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Plan</td>
<td>What is the form of the song? In the introduction, the main theme is stated, and recurs again between sections with different themes that reflect the story.</td>
<td>What is the plot of the story? The inspector tries to find who killed the composer by interviewing all the instruments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>How does the composer develop the theme?</td>
<td>How does the writer develop the plot?</td>
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