

Ferde Grofé

Life Dates: 1892-1972
Country of Origin: United States
Musical Era: Modern



“Our land is rich in music, and if you listen you can hear it right now. This is our music you hear, surging forth, singing up to everyone of us.”

Ferde Grofé

Ferde Grofé was born in New York City to German immigrants. His father was an accomplished violinist and his mother played viola and piano. She gave Grofé his first music lessons. Grofé’s father died when Ferde was only eight years old. His mother then took him to Leipzig, Germany, where he studied many instruments, as well as composition. At the age of 14, Grofé ran away from home. After doing a considerable amount of traveling, he ended up in Los Angeles, California. There he played in a symphony, as well as in some dance bands.

In 1919, he quit his symphony job and started his own dance band. His band was unusual in two ways. First, instead of deciding by himself how the music should be played, he welcomed the musicians’ comments and often edited pieces based on their suggestions. Second, while most bands at that time improvised their music (or made up the tunes during the performance), Grofé’s band planned every note that they were going to play before the performance. Sometimes they even memorized their music so that they would look like they were improvising.

Grofé’s music career had many facets. In addition to writing for dance bands, Grofé wrote orchestral compositions in a jazz style called “symphonic jazz.” Grofé also wrote music for the radio and movies. He played the piano, and even made his own piano rolls. He also taught at the Juilliard School of Music in New York City.

The composer liked to write pieces about American themes. He traveled throughout the United States, to California, Arizona, Wisconsin, Illinois, New York and other states. His music is described as “picturesque” and depicts some of the places he visited during his travels. In addition to the Grand Canyon Suite, he also wrote a Mississippi Suite and a Niagara Suite.

Questions from the reading: Who else in Ferde Grofé’s family were musicians?
What were some of the different careers that Grofé had?
How was Grofé’s band different from other dance bands?

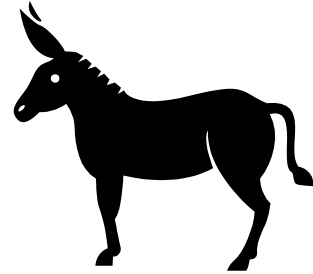
Questions for research: Grofé was known for arranging a famous piece of music by George Gershwin. What was that piece?
What other information can you find out about George Gershwin?

Lesson Plan for “On the Trail” from *Grand Canyon Suite* by Ferde Grofé

This lesson contains many activities that you can use to introduce this music to your students.

Materials:

- Recording of “On the Trail”
- Biographical information on Ferde Grofé
- Children’s books on the Grand Canyon (see attached list)
- Related photos/videos



Listening Repertoire:

- “On the Trail” from *Grand Canyon Suite*
- Other selections by Grofé

Suggested topics for discussion:

- Travel in the American Southwest/Arizona/Grand Canyon
- Grand Canyon vs. Letchworth State Park
- Life of Ferde Grofé
- Program music/symphonic music

Activity 1: Learn the story of the *Grand Canyon Suite*

In August 1931, Grofé was in Chicago for the wedding of Paul Whitman who asked him to compose a new, modern work for the orchestra. Grofé moved with his family into a Chicago hotel, where he began working on the new project. There, he reflected on a vacation he had taken in the 1920’s and used this as his inspiration for a suite about Arizona’s Grand Canyon.

Although initially inspired by the sounds around the busy hotel, Grofé eventually became too distracted. Therefore, Whitman suggested that he leave Chicago and take his family to a lakeside cottage in nearby Wisconsin. It is here that Grofé completed what was to be his most famous work.

The Suite was originally titled *Five Pictures of the Grand Canyon*, but became known as the *Grand Canyon Suite* soon after its premiere in Chicago in November 1931.

📖 Link Up!

For information on the Grand Canyon with excellent photos: www.hittetrail.com

For an additional lesson plan for the Grand Canyon Suite : www.courses.wcupa.edu

For information on Letchworth Park: www.letchworthpark.com

Activity 2: Listen to the story that the music tells and clap rhythms from “On the Trail.”

A traveler and his burro are descending the trail. The sharp hoof beats of the animal form an unusual rhythmic background for the cowboy's song. The sound of a waterfall tells them of a nearby oasis. A lone cabin is soon sighted and, as they near it, a music box is heard. The travelers stop at the cabin for refreshment. Now fully rested, they journey forth at a livelier pace. The movement ends as man and burro disappear in the distance. This is the most popular movement of the suite. It starts as the orchestra simulates the loud bray of a burro. After a violin cadenza, the first theme - a graceful melody in a rhythmic pattern - is established. It has the feeling of the burro walking. The second theme of the movement - a melody in Western style - is played contrapuntally to the first. This is followed by a suggestion of an old music box, which is played by the celeste. The opening theme is heard again in a faster tempo. The movement is concluded with the bray of the burro and the musical ending, itself, is short and incisive.

Text taken from www.class-midi.com/canyon.htm.

Clap and say these rhythms from “On the Trail”:

The image displays four rows of musical notation for clapping and saying rhythms. Each row consists of a musical staff with notes and rests, and a corresponding line of text below it. The first row starts with a 2/4 time signature. The notes and rests are: a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. The text below is: Cow - boy Cow - boy Cow - boy Bow - leg - ged. The second row has the same notation and text. The third row has the same notation and text. The fourth row has the same notation and text.

Cow - boy Cow - boy Cow - boy Bow - leg - ged

Cow - boy Cow - boy Cow - boy Bow - leg - ged

Cow - boy Bow - leg - ged Cow - boy Bow - leg - ged

Bow - leg - ged Bow - leg - ged Bow - leg - ged Bow - leg - ged

Activity 3: Create your own Sand Painting

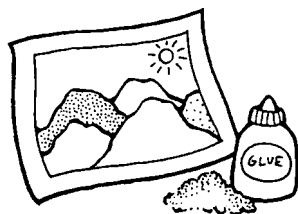
The sands of the Grand Canyon take on beautiful colors, particularly at sunset. Use these techniques to make a picture of your idea of The Painted Desert.

Materials:

- Fine white sand
- Paper cups, plastic spoons, paper plates
- Powdered fabric dye or food coloring
- Small jars with lids
- White liquid glue
- Heavy white drawing paper
- Small paintbrushes

To prepare the sand: Fill the cups half-full with sand. Fill each cup with water and add the coloring agent. The more you add, the darker the sand will become. Let stand for fifteen minutes. Stir with a spoon, drain off the water, and spread the sand on a paper plate to dry overnight. Keep colors separate.

Project I Directions: Draw a picture of the canyon wall lightly with pencil on your paper. Be sure to show several layers of rock. Put some white glue in a paper cup (or jar lid) and use a paintbrush to paint one section of your drawing. Carefully sprinkle one color of sand onto the glue. Repeat for all the sections, using several colors. Let the painting dry. When you lift up your painting, carefully remove the excess sand that was not glued.



Project II Directions: Spoon a layer of colored sand in the bottom of the jar. Continue adding layers of different colors until the jar is full. If you wish, tip the jar so that some of the layers are uneven. When the jar is full you may carefully push a craft stick or wire down through all the layers to get an unusual effect. Be sure the jar is full and screw on the lid.

