

Modest Mussorgsky



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Life Dates: 1839-1881

Nationality: Russian

Period: Romantic

"Thanks to nanny, I've got a deep understanding of Russian tales. This deep feeling for the soul of common people; their life became the main impulse for musical improvisation before I learned the basics in piano"
Mussorgsky

He is known for his operas and piano works.

Major Works: *Boris Godunov* (1872), *The Khovansky Affair* (1872), and *Pictures at an Exhibition for piano* (1874)

- Mussorgsky's mother was his first piano teacher.
- He was a member of a group of composers Russian Nationalists called *The Five* (or *The Mighty Handful*).
- Because of financial difficulties, he joined the civil service in 1857.
- Mussorgsky did not have fame during his life time.
- He died from alcohol intoxication in 1881.
- Mussorgsky left many works unfinished so his colleague, Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, edited and published them after his death.
- His *Pictures at an Exhibition for piano* was later orchestrated by Ravel.

"Night on Bald Mountain" (1867)

The piece was inspired by a short story by Gogol in which St. John witnesses a witches' sabbath on the Bald Mountain near Kiev. After Mussorgsky's death, his colleague, Rimsky-Korsakov rearranged the piece. Because Rimsky-Korsakov changed the tone color of the work, it is still controversial.

There is another arrangement done by Stokowski which was popularized by Disney's movie, *Fantasia* (1940) in a scene starring the demon Chernabog.



📖 Link up to learn more about Mussorgsky!
<http://w3.rz-berlin.mpg.de/cmp/mussorgsky.html>

Lesson Plan for “Night on Bald Mountain”* (1867)

Music Standard Addressed and Performance Indicators:

Standard 3: Responding to and Analyzing Works of Art

Students will:

(b) use appropriate terms to reflect a working knowledge of the musical elements

(f) use terminology from music and other arts to analyze and compare the structures of musical and other artistic and literary works.

Objectives:

Students will:

- explore the genre of orchestral program music,
- listen to, describe, and interpret (through drawing and/ or writing) a piece of music (“Night on Bald Mountain”).

Materials: (to be selected based on activities chosen)

- CD player and recording (for teacher use)
- Biographical information on Mussorgsky (for teacher use)
- Drawing paper or large roll of poster paper for art activity
- Drawing/painting supplies of choice (markers, crayons, tempura, water color, pencils) for art activity
- Painting smocks/old shirts for art activity
- Pencils and paper for writing activity
- Who/What/Where/When/Why template for scary writing activity
- Scary Stories Booklist (for teacher use)
- “Night on Bald Mountain” video clip from *Fantasia*
- “Night on Bald Mountain” VHS (Clearvue Music Appreciation series)

Listening Repertoire:

“Night on Bald Mountain” by Modest Mussorgsky

BACKGROUND ON “NIGHT ON BALD MOUNTAIN”

Because the background information on this piece may be considered inappropriate for some schools, please go to the following website to obtain information.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Night_on_Bald_Mountain

In 1860, at the age of 21, Mussorgsky wrote to his mentor Mily Balakirev, the leader of the Russian National School, of “a most interesting work” he had been commissioned to write for the first act of “The Bald Mountain,” to be based on Megden’s drama “The Witch.” Throughout the composing process Mussorgsky kept in constant contact with both Balakirev and Rimsky-Korsakov, sending them musical scores along with his ideas as they developed. Mussorgsky was hopeful about the composition. He viewed it as his most mature piece and saw it as totally Russian, which excited him because of its difference from the German sound that was prevalent at the time.

*This piece is also known as “St. John’s Night on the Bare Mountain” and “Night on Bare Mountain.”

Balakirev did not share his protégé’s enthusiasm. He was so skeptical that Mussorgsky’s confidence was shaken for the rest of his life.

Mussorgsky revised the piece many times and intended on two occasions to introduce it into other dramatic works. Again, the plans fell through.

The score was revised by Rimsky-Korsakov, after Mussorgsky’s death, and was first performed in 1886 when Rimsky-Korsakov conducted it with great success. It was the first work that earned for Mussorgsky the popular acclaim that had been denied him during his lifetime.

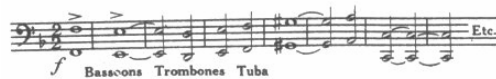
“Night On Bald Mountain” was used in Disney’s *Fantasia*. The demon in this segment is said to have been modeled on Bela Lugosi. He is named Chernobog, after the evil god in Slavonic mythology.

Procedures:

Note to the teacher: Although this is an enjoyable lesson for Halloween, it can be modified for schools in which the celebration of Halloween and related topics are deemed inappropriate. Similarly, the background information on the piece is provided primarily for your own information. The videos listed are provided as an optional supplement. Review and use at your discretion.

- Play excerpts from “Night on Bald Mountain,” asking students to determine the mood.
- Introduce themes from the piece and discuss as depicted below, then play the entire piece in preparation for one or more of the suggested activities.

- 1) The tone poem opens *allegro feroce* (fast and fierce), with a turbulent figure in the strings against which the trombones, tuba, and bassoons thunder the theme.



- 2) The dance is saturated with the Russian folk idiom and appears in strongly marked rhythms in the oboes and clarinets, presenting an effective contrast to the opening theme.



- 3) The *allegro feroce* of the opening returns, the brass weaving its theme against rapid chromatic passages in woodwinds and strings. A new dance theme appears, at first in fairly slow tempo, but gradually working up to a frenzied climax.



- 4) The bell tolls mournfully six times. Strings and harp announce the coming of dawn.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- 1) In relation to the listening lesson, ask children to write three words to describe the mountain. Then have a class discussion on what a night might be like on Bald Mountain.
- 2) For a Halloween listening lesson, ask children to imagine that it is Halloween night. Who might they find on Bald Mountain? What are they doing? Have children draw a picture or write a paragraph to support their views.
- 3) Watch the excerpt from “Fantasia.” Compare/contrast their ideas of Bald Mountain with the video.
- 4) Making up a group story: After listening to the music, the teacher begins a group story with an opening such as “One dark and stormy night, I was driving along the road when suddenly....” The first child completes the sentence. Each child in turn adds another sentence until the story is complete.
- 5) Creating a group picture book: Using the story above, each student draws a picture to correspond with his/her sentence. All are bound in a book to share with younger children.
- 6) Scary Stories (Reading and writing): Students will complete the scary story writing template in response to a read aloud by the teacher. Then, using the same template, they will create their own stories.
- 7) Creating group murals. Divide class into groups. Have each group create a mural based on their listening/study of “Night on Bald Mountain” and/or other program music.
- 8) Review the scary story writing template. Either individually or in a group, students will write an original short story, based on the template.

THE 5 WS OF SCARY STORY WRITING

WHO? Who are the main characters? How are they described in the story?	
WHAT? What is the scary story about? What is the problem and how is it resolved?	
WHEN? When does the story take place?	
WHERE? Where does the story take place?	
WHY? Why is the main character in danger? Why is there a problem?	