

Music Activity Ideas

PA Standard - 9.1: Production, Performance and Exhibition of Dance, Music, Theater and Visual Arts

Explore the Celesta - How can music communicate experiences, stories or emotions?

Tchaikovsky was one of the first composers to use a new (in 1892, that is!) instrument called the celesta (che-LE-sta). In *The Nutcracker*, it provides the distinctively delicate tinkling notes in "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy." Taken from the French word for "heavenly," the celesta gives a magical, dreamy or other-worldly feeling to the music.

Resources:

YouTube clip, featuring Yoland Collin, PBT Principal Pianist / Music Administrator / PBT Orchestra Manager, in a virtual program, "The Music of the Season, Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*,"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vixzySKiiqQ&t=2426s>, 40:27 - 44:33

Youtube clip, featuring Simon Rattle, Conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQPey60lcBM&t=188s>, 2:30 - 3:38

Celesta music:

- ["Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy"](#)
- ["Hedwig's Theme"](#) from the Harry Potter movie series, by John Williams
- ["Won't You Be My Neighbor"](#) (Theme song for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* television show), by Fred Rogers
- ["Neptune, the Mystic,"](#) (starting at 2:17) from *The Planets*, an orchestral suite by Gustav Holst

Prompts:

- Why did Tchaikovsky want to use the celesta? Why did he want to keep it a secret?
 - What does it make you think of? How does it make you feel?
 - Draw a picture of the feeling the music gives you. Can be abstract or representational. What colors and images does the music make you think of?
 - Create a word bank of words that describe this music.
 - Create a moodboard that represents the music. Describe why you chose these items for your moodboard.
 - Describe how your body would move to the music of the celesta.
-

How can music help to tell the story of the ballet?

Resources: *The Nutcracker* Music Excerpts

- [The Battle Scene](#)
- [Waltz of the Snowflakes](#)
- [Exuberance](#)
- [Elegance](#)
- [Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy](#)

Activity: Read the story as a class. Listen to the music selections without letting students know the titles of the pieces being played.

Prompts:

- What do you think might be happening in the ballet when you hear the first two selections above? Match the music with scenes in the story.
- What qualities in the music for “The Battle Scene” make it sound like a battle is taking place?
- How does “The Waltz of the Snowflakes” evoke a winter scene?
- Create an acrostic poem that describes the music and action of the scenes. Share poems with the class.
- Match the last three selections with their titles. Describe the qualities of each. What style of movement or choreography would you create for each selection? How would they be different or similar?

“Covering” or Re-interpreting Music

In 1960 jazz greats Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn (who grew up in Pittsburgh) created a [jazz version](#) of [The Nutcracker Suite](#) (which was a shortened version of the ballet’s music that Tchaikovsky produced prior to the ballet’s premiere). Listen to correlating pieces from both works and compare and contrast the two.

[Tchaikovsky’s “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy”](#)

[Ellington’s “Sugar Rum Cherry”](#)

[Tchaikovsky’s “Waltz of the Flowers”](#)

[Ellington’s “Dance of the Floreadores”](#)