

Introduction

Teaching Music through Listening



Listening skills can affect all subject areas

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Listening activities in the classroom accomplish a variety of instructional goals. According to the [2014 Music Standards](#) advocated by the National Association for Music Education and the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, students should be able to “select or choose contrasting music to listen to” for varying purposes, and the dispositions expected of elementary students include the abilities “to hear, read, and notate melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, and expressive elements of music . . . expressed through listening (audiating), reading, and notating music.” These skills improve students’

perceptions and can also transfer to other subject areas. Objectives for listening experiences could include:

- Illustration and reinforcement of the instructional objectives
- The fostering of student creativity
- The development of aural skills and repertoire
- The formation of thoughts and opinions toward music

The teacher's role in a listening lesson is as an active participant, exhibiting attentiveness and interest in the activity, maintaining frequent eye contact with the students, and using facial expressions and body language that indicate enthusiasm and excitement about the activity. One of the most important instructional tools for influencing student acceptance and approval of a musical selection is the teacher's interest and approval of the selection. Compare the participation of these teachers in their listening lessons.

Fostering of Student Creativity

Listening activities provide a natural opportunity to foster student creativity. During or after a listening activity, students working in groups or individually can answer questions, move to music, create art, or write literary responses. These activities address the different types of learning and expression—kinesthetic, visual, and verbal. The creative kinesthetic expression might include making up movement to depict musical structure or characterizing or illustrating the music. Possible visual creative activities are inventing graphic notation, creating listening maps, associating colors with music, and painting and drawing pictures. To explore creative verbal or vocal expression, the student might be asked to discuss aspects of the music, associate words with the music, or write stories or poems that the music invokes.

Development of Aural Skills and Repertoire

In the earliest grades, students should learn to become aware of sounds and focus on aural stimuli. This skill should precede the expectation that students can recognize specific qualities in listening selections. These early

experiences prepare the students to be able to recognize larger works, to respond to longer selections, and to develop an aural repertoire.

Multiple listening opportunities establish a selection in the students' aural repertoire. An approach to repertoire building is to utilize a different active creative experience, such as those listed in the previous section, with each hearing of the selection. Another approach to multiple hearings is to allow the children to hear the entire piece first. Additional hearings then focus on smaller parts and a variety of conceptual emphases. For the final listening, the class will again hear the entire selection. The teacher may combine these two approaches.

Formation of Thoughts and Opinions about Music



Students learn to listen critically

 [Enlarge](#)

A teacher can guide students to formulate educated thoughts and opinions about and mature attitudes toward music as they receive exposure to a variety of musical experiences. Through exposure to a wide range of music through active involvement in listening, the teacher guides the students to an understanding and appreciation of a broader repertoire. The teacher also guides the students to develop thoughts and opinions about repertoire within the context of musical terminology and the history of musical development. Classroom procedures that facilitate the development of these attitudes include activities in which the students:

- Learn the concepts of music so they might discuss and analyze music and musical events.
- Listen to music and reflect and respond to their feelings and perceptions.
- Discuss their attitudes and preferences in a non-judgmental environment.
- Listen to musical selections frequently so that the repertoire becomes familiar.
- Hear music that is not present in their daily environments.

How to Teach Music through Listening Experiences: Step One

Step One: Planning

The teacher must consider several elements when planning to incorporate listening activities. These elements include:

- Age- and grade-appropriate selection of material and activity
- Careful and sequential planning
- Integration of the activity into the students' lives and experiences
- Teacher participation in the activity
- Knowledge of equipment

Age- and Grade-appropriate Selection

The activity must be age- and grade-appropriate. Developmentally, students can respond to listening activities on a continuum that stretches from the simplest experience of recognizing simple sounds, to distinguishing between contrasting sounds, to listening to music selections of varying length and identifying various musical characteristics. Teachers can find age- and grade-appropriate activities in the national standards for school music programs (*The School Music Program: A New Vision* available from NAME/MENC) and in the state standards for music instruction.

The length of a listening selection should match the students' attention span. The younger the student, the shorter the listening example should be. Preschool students will generally lose interest in listening selections that exceed two minutes in length. Older students can listen to lengthier selections. In addition, the selections should be high-quality examples from a variety of music styles and historical periods.

One example of a listening lesson for first grade could include a brief section of Haydn's Symphony No. 94 in G Major, the "Surprise Symphony." The teacher can begin the selection in an intriguing manner without a long verbal introduction and encourage the students to respond physically to the activity.

Careful and Sequential Planning of Procedures

Before beginning the listening lesson, the teacher should familiarize himself or herself with the repertoire. Who composed the piece? Why and when did he or she compose it? How fast is it? Is there more than one movement? Listening to the selection and researching the music will help the teacher convey important information to the students.



Many resources are available for listening experiences

[↗ Enlarge](#)

Listening experiences in the general elementary classroom can take many forms, from playing background music as students enter the classroom, to listening to vocal music that the students will eventually learn and sing, to listening to longer selections which will be a springboard for other classroom experiences, or to illustrating and reinforcing concepts of music. Opportunities for combining listening to musical selections and the general elementary curriculum are endless.

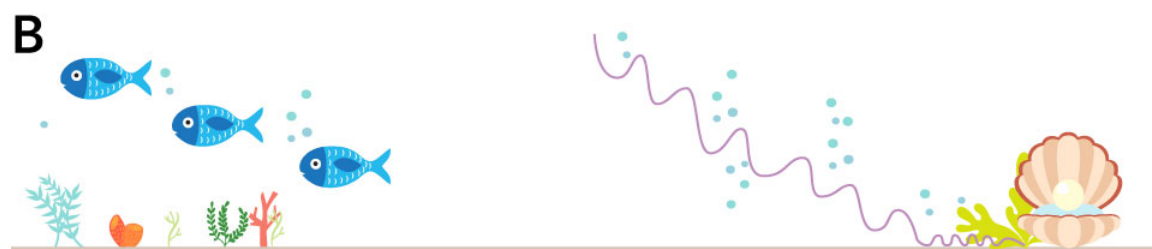
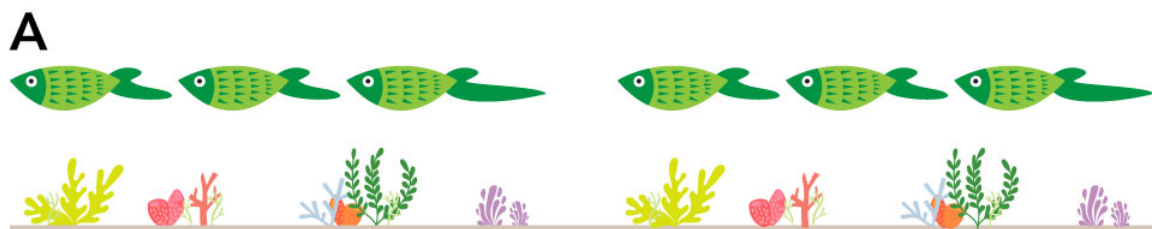
How to Teach Music through Listening Experiences: Step Two

Step Two: Guide the Listening

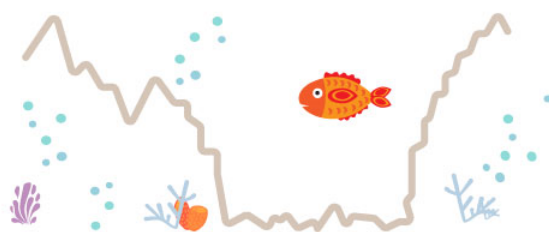
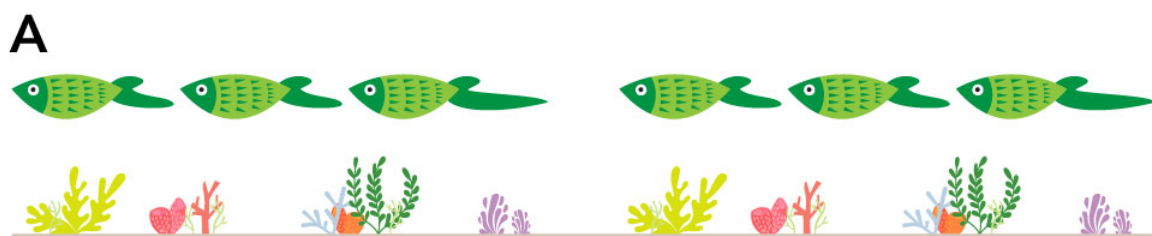
After the repertoire is familiar, the basic teaching procedure for a listening experience in the music classroom might follow this general outline:

- Before the teacher plays the recording, they should direct the students' attention to something specific they are to listen for or explain an activity that the students should participate in while they listen. Then play the listening material either in a complete section or a complete piece, the length depending on the maturity of the students.
- The listening should be active, and students should be challenged to respond to the teacher-specified element(s) in the music. For example, students could stand when they hear the flute or raise a hand when they hear the trumpet. If students have learned a song that is incorporated into a composition as a theme, such as the melody "Simple Gifts" in Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, recognition of the theme will help to reinforce their listening.

Listening maps and call charts are helpful for guiding listening activities. A listening map provides a visual representation of the composition. The map might have pictures, symbols, notation, lines, or any other visual material to guide the students through the selection. A call chart is a visual or written guide to the music. Because it identifies particular points in the music by number, it differs from the listening map. As the students listen to the selection and the musical events occur, the teacher "calls" or announces the number that represents the event. The teacher may provide a copy of the map or chart for each child or prepare one large visual aid for the entire class.



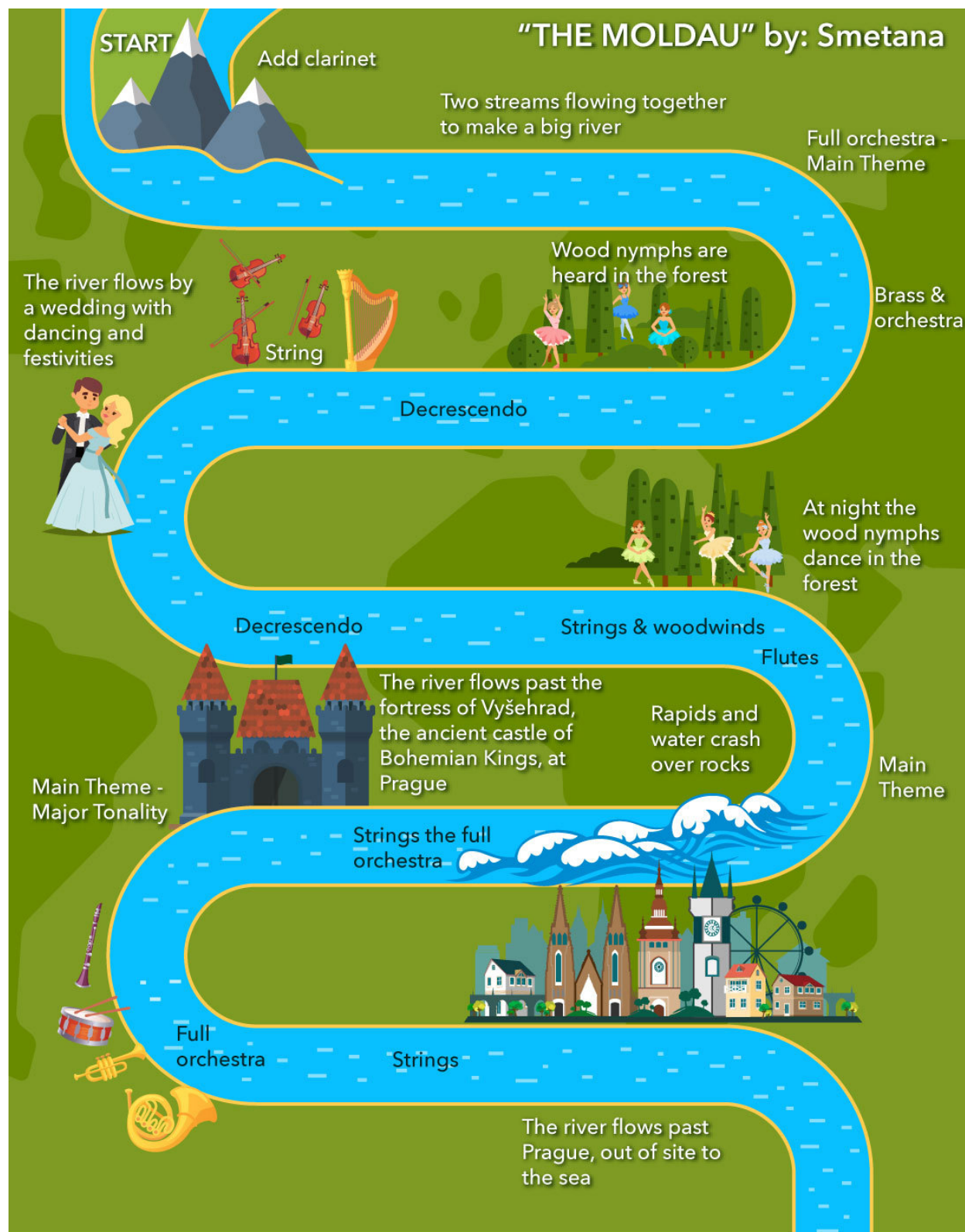
REPEAT



FINE

Listening map of "The Aquarium" from Carnival of the Animals by Camille Saint-Saëns

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Listening map of "The Moldau" by Bedrich Smetana

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A Lit- tle fugue this is the lit- tle by fugue

B First it takes off and goes a- round Bach

C And around and a- round and a- round and a- round

D And then it floats off for the sky the more it sails so far from the sound ...

Little Fugue

Little Fugue

Little Fugue

Little Fugue

Little Fugue Little Fugue Little Fugue Little Fugue

A more abstract listening map of "Little Fugue in G minor" by J.S. Bach

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Limiting the students' sensory input helps them to focus on their listening skills. This teacher asks the students to close their eyes, listen carefully to the melody, and move their arms to indicate the rise and fall of the musical phrase. Note how she indicates that this will be the second time the students will listen to the selection.

It is important for the teacher *not* to provide audible instructions while the music is playing. Students need to focus specifically on the music and will seldom hear instructions over a recording.

Reading and writing activities can also accompany listening experiences. The students could:

- Follow a simple score and cue imaginary instruments as they enter
- Follow a call chart or listening map
- Write a narrative of a selection that is program music

These activities are multi-sensory and will assist in actively engaging students in critical listening.

How to Teach Music through Listening Experiences: Step Three

Step Three: Discuss the Selection

After the first hearing of the selection, the teacher should discuss the music and the assigned listening activity with the class, evaluating why and how it was successful or unsuccessful. For younger students, the discussion might consist of a question-answer session about the factual information heard in the selection.

Second Listening

A good technique a teacher can employ for a well-planned listening experience is providing a second listening opportunity. As with the first listening, the teacher can guide the listening with directed questions or

requests for specific responses. It is also helpful to build the second listening activity on the first activity.

- Sometimes the teacher might repeat the first activity with the same accompanying activity, especially if the listening was brief and the students need a second opportunity for success. Or perhaps the students enjoyed the first activity and would like to repeat it, as did the students in the “Surprise Symphony” listening experience.
- The teacher presents the students with a new listening problem or repeats the first activity for the second listening.
- An additional discussion should follow the second activity to evaluate and assess the activities. The teacher may extend the learning to additional activities.

Multiple opportunities to listen and respond to the same selection will help the students become more familiar with the recording, add the selection to their aural vocabulary, and provide a common reference point.

How to Teach Music through Listening Experiences: Step Four

Step Four: Extend and Integrate the Listening

After several hearings of a selection, the teacher extends the listening experience by relating the selection to other music concepts, classroom or life experiences, or appropriate historical information. Such extensions might include:

- Listening to other compositions by a composer (or composers) from the same style period or from the same culture
- Contrasting the selection with music from other historical periods

- Creating compositions that are similar to the selection

A helpful planning tool is the integration of the listening activity into other parts of students' school activities or personal lives. The introduction to the listening activity and the discussion that follows the hearing of the selection are excellent opportunities to add material that creates tangible and relevant to the students' lives.

Awareness of students' experiences in other disciplines enables the music teacher to make connections with students' concurrent themes of study. For example, when the science class is studying the animal kingdom, the class could be listening to Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals* or when the language arts class is being introduced to form in poetry, the class could be listening to selections that illustrate form in music. Or, using the music composition "Snow is Dancing" from Claude Debussy's *Children's Corner Suite*, the teacher can coordinate the listening experience with the first snowfall—an event that is always exciting to elementary children.



Integrating listening helps students retain information

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The teacher needs to be engaged with the students

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Knowledge of Equipment

Several points about audio equipment are important to consider. The teacher needs to:

- Be familiar with the equipment and make sure the equipment will work during the class activity
- Have the music cued to the starting point so there will be no “down time” during the activity
- Use quality equipment to play the recorded selections

- Play the selections at a volume that students can hear comfortably in the classroom

Assessment of Listening Experiences

If an assessment is appropriate, a variety of subjective and objective tools are available to assess students' knowledge of and response to a listening experience. Subjective assessment tools include any form of questioning or assignment that requires the student to describe the music either verbally, kinesthetically, or visually. Objective evaluation and assessment are usually in the form of paper-and-pencil charts or directed questioning sessions that focus on the objectives or goals of the listening experience.

Technology as a Tool for Listening Experiences

The use of technology is a natural partner for classroom listening activities. The development of the radio and phonograph—technologies from the early 1900s—facilitated the introduction of listening experiences in the music classroom. One hundred years later, technological advancements make possible a variety of instructional techniques.

- Using notation software (*Finale*[™] or *Sibelius*[™]), teachers can reproduce musical themes or motives from repertoire selected for the classroom.
- Students can use notation software to compose music inspired by classroom listening activities. Free notation software is available to download from the Internet.
- With sound-editing software (e.g. *Adobe Audition*[™], *Bias Peak*[™], or *Sound Forge*[™]), teachers and students can isolate sections of compositions to develop examples to explain musical form.
- Teachers and students can use Microsoft *PowerPoint*[™] to create multimedia presentations of listening examples. They can use presentations not only to provide listening maps but also to allow

students the opportunity to reflect on the emotions and feelings evoked by the literature.

- They can also use Microsoft *PowerPoint*[™] to combine stories and poems—published as well as newly created—with listening examples.