

SOUNDSCAPES AND MUSICAL STORIES

Inspired by Jehan Georges Vibert (French, 1840–1902), *The Grasshopper and the Ant (Le Cigale et la Formi)*, 1875
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Grade Level K-12, with some adaptations

OVERVIEW

Students will use Jehan Georges Vibert's painting *The Grasshopper and the Ant* to create and perform a sound composition. Students will use musical sounds to enhance the reading of Aesop's fable that inspired the painting.

ANTICIPATORY SET

What is a fable? How is it different from other stories? How might we use musical sounds to help tell the story? Could we do the same with a work of art – like a painting? What might this sound like?

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Students will create an aleatoric (chance) composition based on the painting Vibert's *The Grasshopper and the Ant*.
- Students will use musical instruments to create and perform an accompaniment for a fable.



Jehan Georges Vibert (French, 1840–1902), *The Grasshopper and the Ant (Le Cigale et la Formi)*, 1875, oil on canvas, 24 1/4 x 33 1/2 in. (61.6 x 85.1 cm), Joslyn Art Museum, Gift of Francis T. B. Martin, 1995.44

MATERIALS & RESOURCES:

- Copies of [The Ant and the Grasshopper fable \(Aesop\) from EnchantedLearning.com](https://www.enchantedlearning.com/reading/fables/aesop/antgrasshopper.shtml)
- Print or projectable image of Vibert's *The Grasshopper and the Ant*.
- White board or large tablet paper to write on.
- Markers
- Selection of musical instruments and sound makers. These may be classroom instruments, world instruments, homemade instruments, or found sounds. Have enough for each person in the class, plus some extras to offer sound alternatives. Body percussion and sounds might also be used.

VOCABULARY:

- Musical Instrument Classifications – Idiophone, Aerophone, Cordophone, Membranophone, Corpophone (how sounds are made).
- Found Sounds – Sounds from items that would not normally be considered instruments.
- Intensity – Musical intensity can be heard in the dynamics – the louds and softs – and/or the number of sounds in a specific time period; artistic intensity changes with the size of the subject and the vibrance of the color.
- Aleatoric music – a composition in which one or more elements are left to chance. See: Music of John Cage
- Improvisation – spontaneously creation, in this case music.
- Timbre – unique sound of each instrument, also called tone color.

LESSON OUTLINE

Fable Introduction:

1. Begin by asking students about fables. What are they? How do they differ from other stories and tales? Do they know any fables?
2. Introduce the selected fable. Read the fable and ask what might be learned from it. This will be the moral and is the main point of the fable.

Soundscape Activity:

1. Introduce the students to the selected painting. Begin by asking them what they see. Continue discussion, filling in information about the artist, the subject and any other information that might be of interest.
2. Identify the main characters, parts, and emphasis found in the painting. These are the subjects that will be "played." Discuss how the artist has used these to tell the story of the painting. Ask how they might use sound to describe these subjects. Inform them that they will use musical instruments to "play" the painting. In Vibert's *The Grasshopper and the Ant*, we see the two men, but we also see the large expanse of snow (winter), the bare trees, grey sky, as well as the food carried on the horses and the town in the distance. All are subjects that can be portrayed in the composition.
3. Introduce the instruments available for their use. This may include how the instrument makes sound, how to play them and where they came from. In selecting sounds for the performance, the teacher can guide the selection, or have the students explore the instruments to see which ones they feel would best interpret the elements of the painting. Students may be encouraged to search for and use "found sounds", or build their own instruments, rather than use regular instruments (if time is available).
4. Once the subjects from the painting and the instruments to portray them are selected, describe how we will "read" the painting. Imagine a vertical line or cursor running from the top to the bottom of the painting. As the cursor moves from left to right (like we read) it crosses the painting, revealing the subject(s) selected above. As they are revealed, the students play their selected subjects. As an example, the sounds selected for the musician (grasshopper) do not sound until the cursor is over the musician, and stop when the cursor passes him. Intensity of the subject (both vertical size and vibrance of color) may be demonstrated by increasing the intensity of the sound, either louder or more frequent, as the intensity changes in the painting.
5. Use a cursor (stick, pointer, etc.) to move from left to right, "reading" the painting. Start from slightly off the left side, so that the composition can appear with the painting as the cursor reaches the left side. As the cursor slowly crosses the painting from left to right, the instruments perform their sounds as their subject is revealed under the cursor. Once the cursor reaches the far right side, continue off the edge, allowing the composition to end, leaving silence (as the composition began). The leader/teacher can vary the speed of the cursor's travel from left to right.

6. When completed, break the silence by having the students applaud with their sounds. Discuss how the composition was able to describe the painting and the fable.
7. This activity can be used with any painting or print. [Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night*](#) works very well and can be tied in with [Don McLean's "Vincent."](#)

Musical Stories Activity:

1. Introduce the students to the selected fable (story, tale or poem), and read the fable. Discuss what the author might be trying to tell them.
2. Select major characters, subjects and actions found in the fable. Make a list of these keywords and select which are most important to the telling of the fable. These will be the subjects/keywords selected to have musical sounds as the fable is spoken during the performance.
3. Introduce the instruments available for their use. This may include how the instrument makes sound, how to play them and where they came from. In selecting sounds for the performance, the teacher can guide the selection, or have the students explore the instruments to see which ones they feel would best interpret the elements of the painting. Students may be encouraged to search for and use "found sounds", or build their own instruments, rather than use regular instruments (if time is available).
4. When instruments have been selected, have the students rehearse how they will use their sounds to depict their subject. Remind them that everyone is trying to hear their sounds, so keep them at a low volume during rehearsal. When done, have each subject group demonstrate their sounds for the class. With younger students, it helps to practice their entrances randomly saying the subject/keyword and having the groups play their sounds on cue. When they are confident, begin the performance.
5. Begin by introducing the title, the author and who is performing the composition. Then begin reading aloud the fable. Pause slightly at each keyword, allowing the students to begin their sounds. Continue on through the fable, noting each keyword. At the conclusion of the fable, have the students say the moral in unison. Follow this student applause using their instruments. Take a bow!

EXTENSIONS







- Use the Soundscape Activity to "play" photographs/paintings related to topics in Social Studies, Geography, Science, and Religion.
- Use the Musical Stories Activity to accompany stories, folk tales and poems. (See: A Tapestry of Tales by Miller and Bennett, John Jacobsen's Music Express Magazines for "Sound Poems"; I went to a Science Class Coffee House years ago, where the students created "jazz" poems about microbes, accompanied by bongos, etc.)
- Use the Soundscape Activity to play Modern Art examples such as Mondrian. This offers an opportunity to explore tone colors in sound blocks, as we find in many of the compositions of Edgar Varese. You may also use the reverse, having the students prepare a grid on their paper, then listen to a composition by Varese (such as Ionization). Have students select colors that represent the sound blocks that Varese used and create a "painting" in reaction to the composition.

CONTENT STANDARDS




[NEBRASKA CONTENT AREA STANDARDS](#)


[IOWA CORE STANDARDS](#)



The Ant and the Grasshopper



One beautiful summer  day, a lazy grasshopper  was chirping and sitting and playing games , just as he did every day. A hard-working ant  passed by, carrying a huge leaf  that he was taking back to the ant's  nest.




The grasshopper  said to the ant ,
"All you ants  do is work all day.
You should be more like me and play, play, play!"




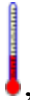
The ant  replied, "I'm storing food  for the winter  season. You should be working, for just the same reason.









What will you eat when the weather gets cold ? How will you feed your hungry household?"



The grasshopper  laughed, "All you ants  do is work and worry. Slow down, don't be in such a hurry.



Just look  around, there's plenty of food, 
Don't give me advice, that's just plain rude."


The ant  kept working, the grasshopper  kept playing, and winter  soon came.


The ant  had prepared for the winter  and had just enough food  stored in the nest to last through the cold , harsh weather.


Now that winter  had arrived, the grasshopper  couldn't find any food , and soon became very hungry. But he soon remembered the hard-working ant  he had made fun of during the summer . The grasshopper  went to the ant's  nest and asked for food .





The ant , who was still busy keeping the food  clean and dry, said,






"I toiled to save food  for the winter  freeze,

while you spent the summer  playing in ease.

I stored just enough food for the winter , it's true,

But I can't feed you all winter , or I'll starve too."

The ant  gave the grasshopper  a few crumbs, but the grasshopper  was cold, miserable, and hungry all winter .

The next summer , the grasshopper  worked hard to store food for the upcoming winter . That next winter , grasshopper  was well fed and happy!

He had learned to think ahead and plan for the future.

And that is the end of the story.

The moral of the story:
PREPARE TODAY FOR THE NEEDS THAT YOU WILL HAVE
TOMORROW.

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