



Jamming on the Subway

Focused Listening for Percussion Timbres

Learning Objective

Students will improve their ability to identify the timbre of different percussion instruments through a focused listening activity centered on Aaron Copland's "Subway Jam."

Resources and Materials

- Field recording of a subway train (track 11 on the accompanying CD)
- Recording of Aaron Copland's "Subway Jam" (track 12 on the accompanying CD)

Vocabulary

Timbre - the character or quality of a musical sound or voice as distinct from its pitch and intensity.

Pre-Assessment

Ask your students to name any percussion instruments they can think of. How would they describe the sound of each instrument? What role would they say the percussion section plays in an orchestra?

Teaching Sequence

1. Discuss how carefully one has to listen for sounds, and remind students that focused listening requires them to concentrate on everything they hear, not just the sounds they expect to hear.
2. Ask the students to practice focused listening in the classroom for two minutes. At the end of the two minutes, ask each student what they heard. Make a list of their responses.
3. Ask the students to practice the same level of focused listening as they listen to a new piece of music. Without introducing the title, play Aaron Copland's "Subway Jam" (Length: 3:15)
4. After listening to the music, ask them what they heard. Any answer is appropriate at this point. Ask them how they might describe this music to a friend that had never heard it. Did it make them think of or imagine anything in particular? Was it fast or slow? Loud or soft? Could they hum the melody? If not, why not?
5. Share the title of the piece with the class, and then ask the students if any of them have ever ridden on a subway (or the DART in Dallas). Does this music sound like it might be a good soundtrack to a subway ride?
6. Before listening to the piece a second time, ask the students to focus their listening on the instruments, paying particular attention to the percussion. What instruments do they hear? Are there different kinds of drums? Do they hear other percussion instruments besides drums? If so, what are they?
7. Share pictures and sound examples of the following percussion instruments (and one brass). These can be found on DSOKids.com:

Bass Drum

Snare Drum

Cymbals

Conga Drum

Tenor Drum

Wood Block

Cowbell

Trombone



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Culminating Activity

On the “Subway Jam Percussion” page, have them identify each of the instruments in the pictures, and write one or more descriptive words for each instrument in the space provided. After they have completed this, have them listen to Copland’s “Subway Jam” again. This time, as soon as they hear an instrument (or family of instruments) they should touch their finger on the picture of that instrument or family. Beware, this may take more than one finger at a time!

As an aid, here is a rough timeline of the piece, and the instruments you’ll hear:

0:00 Bass Drum lays down a steady, slow pulse.

0:15 Bass Drum pulse speeds up as other percussion instruments enter.

0:36 Solo Trombone plays 3 notes, followed by a rhythm on Cowbell and Cymbals (played with brushes).

0:45 Drums enter with fast patterns, while Brass chords in pairs add punctuation.

1:06 Brass holds a sustained tone. Snare Drum enters for the first time.

1:15 Drums stop. Trombones repeat a little 5-note melody three times.

1:23 Drums play fast patterns, while Trombones slide up and down.

1:55 Drums stop. Wood Block and Cymbals (played with brushes) accompany 2-note figures in the Woodwinds.

2:33 Drums play fast patterns while Brass punctuates.

2:44 Brass plays 6 ascending chords, followed by a series of glissandi (slides)

3:03 Final climax: a series of loud chords played by all the instruments

Extension Activity

1. Listen to the field recording of actual subway trains (track 11 on the accompanying CD). Ask your students how it is similar to Copland’s music. How is it different?
2. Using the Listening Map on page 21 as a model, ask the students to create their own listening map for Copland’s “Subway Jam.”

Evaluation

Were the students able to identify the timbre of different percussion instruments while listening to Copland’s “Subway Jam”?

TEKS Connections

FA.M.(3-6).b.6C, FA.M.(3-6).b.6,