

TALKING ABOUT MUSIC WITH YOUR CLASS

Listening to music comes naturally; talking about music may not.

Once you share a piece of music with your class, you may want to discuss it together. If you are not a music specialist, this may seem like a challenge. This guide should help!

Soundstreams has created this **Talking About Music** guide to help educators talk about any song easily. Take some time to read through this glossary of general musical terms. Each term comes with a few classroom prompts so that you can start applying your music knowledge.

For an even more in-depth discussion, Soundstreams has created some composition-specific study guides which delve into the themes, history, and creation process of selected individual pieces. All guides are available at www.soundstreams.ca/education/resources

BEYOND “DID YOU LIKE IT?” ...

- How did the music make you feel?
- Describe the piece in one word. If this music were a colour, shape, ice cream flavour, super-hero power, etc. what would it be?
- What changes did you notice in the music?
- What was a memorable moment from the composition? Why did it stand out for you?
- What story or image did the music evoke?
- What sorts of rhythms did you hear?
- Create a descriptive phrase for this work starting with “It was like...” (ex. “...hungry sharks circling in a tempest” or “...fairy poetry on the whispered wind”).
- Use the prompts below to talk about the elements of music as they relate to the piece.

THE ELEMENTS OF MUSIC

The Ontario Curriculum describes the following Elements of Music: Duration (beat, rhythm, metre,

tempo), Pitch (melody), Dynamics, Timbre, Texture / Harmony, and Form.

MELODY

A succession of sounds (pitches) and silences moving through time. Melodies can be thought of as movement in sound (unison, step, skip, leap). A melody is the part that you might hum to yourself as you remember the song.

Classroom prompts:

- Hum or sing back a melody you heard.
- What are some melodies that often get stuck in your head? Why do you think they are so memorable?
- What was the most memorable part of this song?
- Try writing down the melody either in traditional musical notation or in whatever way makes sense to you.

HARMONY

Harmony is the simultaneous sounding of two or more notes, or pitches.

- Were there harmonic elements in this piece?
- How did the harmony accentuate, accompany, or obscure the melody?

Continued

- Were the melody and harmony represented by different timbres? If so, which was which?

RHYTHM

The pattern of long and short sounds or silences. You may automatically think of the percussion section, but all parts of the music must have some sort of rhythm.

Classroom prompts:

- Could you clap back the rhythm from part of the piece?
- Was the rhythm predictable or unpredictable?
- Was there one instrument that seemed to “keep the rhythm” of the piece?
- Compare the rhythm of the music to the rhythms you may hear in everyday life (ex. heartbeat, jackhammer, walking, birdsong, doorbell)

TIMBRE

Timbre relates to the unique quality of sounds that allows us to distinguish between them (e.g., the characteristic sound of a trumpet versus a clarinet, or a male versus a female voice). Also called tone colour.

- Why do you think the composer chose the instrumentation that he/she did?
- How would the work change if it were ‘covered’ by a different instrumentation?
- Try relating each timbre to a human character trait, a colour, or animal

TEXTURE

Texture is a term used in music to describe the blending of concurrent musical sounds and melodies in a composition. A song that consists of just a melody or a melody with chordal accompaniment is said to be mostly “vertical” and is called “homophonic”; something which has two or more melodies played together is said to be mainly “horizontal” and is called “polyphonic”.

The word ‘texture’ is also used to describe the density of concurrent sounds, as in a thin or thick instrumental texture.

The Texture List on SoundMakers includes: Dense, Sparse, Angular, Thin, Dissonant, Consonant, Melodic, Rhythmic, Arrhythmic, Monophonic, Polyphonic.

For definitions of the above musical terms visit www.composertools.com

- Would you describe this piece as mostly harmonic or polyphonic?
- Did you hear examples of thick and/or thin instrumental texture?
- What aspects combined in this work to provide the texture?
- Why do you think the composer was hoping to achieve with the chosen texture?
- How does a single sung melody make you feel versus a polyphonic symphony?

FORM

Most musical works are divided into a series of sections, which together make up the form (or “structure”) of the work. Like in poetry, there are some standard forms such as binary form (AB form); rondo; ternary form (ABA form); theme and variations; twelve-bar blues.

Classroom prompts:

- What were some of the sections of this piece?

Where would you mark a division between one section and the next?

- Was the form of this piece familiar to you?
- Did you hear sections repeated? In what order?
- Did the music build in intensity throughout the work?
- How did the sections of this work seem to work together or contrast each other?

DYNAMICS

Dynamics relates to the varying degree of volume. A transition from softer to louder is called a crescendo; a decrescendo is the opposite. Some dynamic markings are *f* (forte – loud), *ff* (fortissimo – very loud), *mf* (mezzo forte – moderately loud), *p* (piano – soft), *pp* (pianissimo – very soft), *mp* (mezzo piano – moderately soft).

- What was the loudest / softest part of the piece?
- Was there an abrupt change from loud to soft or soft to loud? How did that make you feel?
- Did you notice any crescendos or decrescendos in the piece? At which parts?
- Why do you think the composer chose to make those sections loud / soft?

Continued

- What moods are associated with music that is loud & fast, or loud & slow? Soft & slow? Soft & fast?

TEMPO

Tempo is the speed of a piece. Some common tempo indications are: *allegro* (quickly and in a lively way), *moderato* (at a moderate speed), *andante* (somewhat slowly, at a walking pace), *largo* (slowly), *adagio* (slowly and gracefully), and *vivace* (briskly, quickly, brightly).

- How would your impression of this piece change if it were performed faster or more slowly than it is in the recording?
- Move around the room in a way that indicates the tempo of this piece.
- How does tempo affect the mood of the piece?
- Do you think it is more difficult for performers/ instrumentalists to perform slow songs or quick ones?

WHAT ABOUT “MOOD”?

The **mood** is the aspect of music that is affective. It makes you feel an emotion. Researchers in the field use the term “music emotion” or “music mood” to refer to the affective aspects of music. The study and

classification of moods or emotion in music is called Musical psychology.

On the SoundMakers website you can discover compositions by choosing a specific mood or a combination of moods that you wish to hear. Remember, though, that moods are subjective and not definitive; one piece can have more than one mood attributed to it.

SoundMakers’ Mood List

Dark	Dramatic	Intense	Fervent
Light	Fun	Cheerful	Tranquil
Calm	Energetic	Fiery	
Aggressive	Relaxed	Emotional	

RESOURCES

Source: *Hu, Xiao, Music and mood: Where theory and reality meet*

Source: *Ontario Curriculum Grades 11 & 12: The Arts (2010)*

Source: *Talking About Music – A Dictionary; Paul Nelson (composertools.com)*

SOUNDMAKERS INFO & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Soundstreams has designed this series of Resources to introduce SoundMakers to educators and to offer ways to share this resource in the classroom. PDF versions of this guide and others are available at Soundstreams.ca

In-class workshops are also available through Soundstreams. Soundstreams composers and artist-educators can visit your school or organization for in-class workshop or for a staff learning session.

For more information or to provide us with feedback please contact:

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